

**The Agency of The Displayed Female Body:  
The Political Potential of Negative Affects in Contemporary Feminism and Performance**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of  
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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An earlier version of a section of Chapter 4 was published as '*Splat!: Death, Mess, Failure and Blue-Balling*', *Performance Research*, 19,2 (2014), 98-102.

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## Abstract

This thesis investigates the relationship between the agency of the displayed female body and the critical potential of negativity through examining and creating contemporary feminist performance. This is a practice-based project, in which I present documentation of two performances of mine created during this project, entitled *Splat!* and *How to Become a Cupcake/The Famous' Adaptation of Frankenstein*, submitted alongside the written thesis. My performances are discussed along with those by relevant case studies, namely performance artists from the 1960s and 70s, such as Carolee Schneemann, Hannah Wilke, Marina Abramović and Lynn Hershman, in order to historically and culturally contextualize my practice as a contemporary response to questions their work raised about female subjectivity and the displayed body, and which have circulated within feminist discourse since that time. Taking 'the victim' and 'the whore' as central figures of feminist dispute, this thesis situates female subjectivity within a 'post-feminist' framework, revealing the ways in which the displayed female body has been further delimited by contemporary popular culture. I argue that pop culture's reliance on affirmation via a misguided appropriation of feminist vocabulary, as well its redeployment of second-wave feminism's reputation of exacerbating victimization, has resulted in a contemporary framework aligned with promoting a narrative of redemption for the female subject. The post-feminist female subject is either redeemed as a victim or celebrated as empowered despite potentially misogynist consequences, crucially obstructing her access to critical agency. This thesis considers strategies within performance that resist post-feminism's prescriptively singular and affirmative model of agency. By engaging with the potential of negativity, ineptitude, and dissatisfaction as politically charged strategies of resistance to post-feminist subjectivity, this thesis locates



critical agency in the messy, negative, and dissatisfied (and dissatisfying) subjectivities proposed by my performances.

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## Introduction

### Towards Contemporary Feminist Agency

In 1968 at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, Carolee Schneemann gave a lecture on her practice while undressing, redressing, and undressing again. She describes the aim of the event, entitled *Naked Action Lecture*, as asking the following questions: 'can an artist be an art historian? Can an art historian be a naked woman? Does a woman have intellectual authority? Can she have public authority while naked and speaking[?]'<sup>1</sup> Similarly, at the International Congress of Psychoanalysis in 1980 on the theme of *Sex and Language*, Hannah Wilke read a piece of her writing on the repression and commodification of the body entitled *Visual Prejudice* and sang *My Country 'tis of Thee*, (or 'Cunt-ree', as she wrote in the event's program), while unbuttoning her shirt, revealing her naked body underneath.<sup>2</sup> In 2011, at the very start of this project, without the knowledge of Schneemann's naked lecture or Wilke's topless conference paper, I was asked to briefly describe the intent of my research at an induction meeting for new PhD students in the Department of English and Drama. I began to take my clothes off, as I said, 'I aim to question whether and how it's possible for the displayed female body to retain, access, or enact her agency, autonomy, or critical ability. Can an exposed female body also have a voice? In short: have you heard anything I've said while I was taking off my clothes?'

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<sup>1</sup> Carolee Schneemann, 'Naked Action Lecture', Carolee Schneemann Papers, 1959-1994, 950001, Box 6, Folder 6, The Getty Research Institute, Special Collections, Los Angeles.

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Wilke, 'Sex and Language', International Conference of Psychoanalysis, event program, April 30-May 2, 1980, Hannah Wilke Collection and Archive, Los Angeles, Uncatalogued, Copyright Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon, and Andrew Scharlatt, Licensed by VAGA, New York, DACS, London.

Like Schneemann and Wilke's work, this thesis stems from a concern with the agency of the displayed female body. My research – by practice and through complementary writing – emerged as a concern with mainstream culture's assumptions that the displayed female body lacks criticality and espouses misogyny, and I actively seek to challenge widespread ideologies that deny that body its agency.

The purpose of recounting this anecdote though, is not, as it may seem, to render myself on par with these two icons of feminist performance art, but rather to bring to the forefront perhaps one of the biggest problems with the central question of this project: It was asked 45 years ago. So why, knowing that this has all been done before, am I asking these questions again now?

Recently, a journalistic article about my practice was circulated in the tabloid and broadsheet press.<sup>3</sup> After appearing in a Queen Mary, University of London student

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<sup>3</sup> The same article featured across many tabloids and countries, including *NY Daily News* in New York: Deborah Hastings, 'British Lecturer Shocks Students with Nude Video of Herself Inserting Knife into her Vagina, Urinating on Stage', *NY Daily News*, 24 March 2015

<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/british-lecturer-shocks-students-vagina-video-article-1.2160630> [accessed 15 September 2015]; *Leggo* in Italy: 'Simula Atti Sessuali Davanti Ai Suoi Studenti, La Performance Della Prof Fa Il Giro del WFB', *Leggo*, 25 March 2015

[http://www.leggo.it/NEWS/ESTERI/lauren\\_barri\\_holstein\\_sesso\\_studenti/notizie/1259228.shtml](http://www.leggo.it/NEWS/ESTERI/lauren_barri_holstein_sesso_studenti/notizie/1259228.shtml) [accessed 15 September 2015]; *Spits Nieuws* in The Netherlands: H. Spatel, 'Dramajuf Plast en Vingert Voor Haar Studenten', *Spits Nieuws*, 25 March 2015

<http://www.spitsnieuws.nl/raar/2015/03/dramajuf-plast-en-vingert-voor-haar-studenten>

[accessed 15 September 2015]; and even *Cosmopolitan* in the UK: 'Students Stunned as Teacher Plays Bizarre Video of her Masturbating with a Tampon', *Cosmopolitan*, 27 March 2015

<http://www.cosmopolitan.co.uk/worklife/campus/news/a34489/teacher-video-masturbation-tampon-students/> [accessed 15 September 2015].

newspaper entitled the *Tab*, the article was picked up by the Associated Press.<sup>4</sup> It reached far and wide, from the UK, to Italy, to Brazil, to Russia, reproduced on the pages of the domestic and foreign press.<sup>5</sup> Its general claims were about my practice as a lecturer, exclaiming shock and outrage at the fact that I showed video documentation of my performance work, in which my exposed vagina appears, to my undergraduate students. The details of the series of articles were either inaccurate or fabricated, including the central claim that documentation of my established practice constituted ‘home videos’ of my genitals or amateur pornography, as suggested by the following headline from the *Telegraph*: ‘University Lecturer Plays Students X-Rated Video of Herself’.<sup>6</sup> The video in question is a three-minute trailer of my show *Splat!*, a piece that premiered at The Barbican as the launch for SPILL Festival of Performance 2013, and features significantly within this project. While one might dismiss this article as typical tabloid sensationalism, I believe it points to something rather weighty. The displayed female body, it seems, still

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<sup>4</sup> Jasmine Gould-Wilson, ‘Drama Lecturer Stuns Students With Graphic Video of her Vagina’, *The Tab*, 20 March 2015, <<http://thetab.com/uk/queenmary/2015/03/20/drama-lecturer-stuns-freshers-with-graphic-video-of-her-vagina-21>> [accessed 20th August 2015].

<sup>5</sup> At the time of the circulation of the article, my Vimeo page, on which I present a number of clips of my performance and video work, received over 1 million views. According to the site’s statistics, most of these views were directed from news sites in the UK ([www.queenmary.tab.co.uk](http://www.queenmary.tab.co.uk) and [www.metro.co.uk](http://www.metro.co.uk)), along with a Hungarian women’s popular news site, [www.velvet.hu](http://www.velvet.hu), a Brazilian news site, [www.tanacara.com.br](http://www.tanacara.com.br), and a Russian blog, which features many images of women in wet t-shirt contests or kissing each other at parties, alongside other ‘topical’ and celebrity news, [www.dofiga.net](http://www.dofiga.net).

<sup>6</sup> ‘University Lecturer Plays Students X-rated Video of Herself’, *Telegraph*, 23 March 2015, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/howaboutthat/11489856/University-lecturer-plays-students-X-rated-video-of-herself.html>> [accessed 15 August 2015].

carries with it inescapable controversy, and the denial of its agency remains a crucial and present issue.

Mainstream media's tendency to sensationalize and reinforce the idea that the displayed female body is something to be shocked by, while at the same time presenting similar images of the female body as a commodity and an object to be consumed, is quite telling. The age-old problem of the displayed female body is not, of course, nudity – it is that body's access to agency. The problem for the media is not naked women – it is the scandal of women's agency. The tendency to sensationalize my work and reduce my artistic practice to the realm of 'illegitimate' 'X-rated' practices, focusing on its 'shock-value' rather than its critical ability, is precisely an attempt to strip the female subject of any agency or authority she might possess. While the press also suggests that my nudity is a kind of inappropriate sexual intimacy with students, the more pressing issue for me is that, in this situation, like Schneemann's *Naked Action Lecture* suggests, the relationship of my position as a lecturer is deemed irreconcilable with my displayed body. My position as a lecturer – a position that implies a kind of credibility, critical capacity, authority, or agency over the material I present – must be undermined in some way, in order to reduce me to the same kind of fetishized object as the women presented on 'Page Three', in advertisements, and in pornography, whose self-display is perceived as non-threatening. As Wilke stated in her conference presentation, 'although sex may sell songs, and other products, it is generally considered bad news and dirty stuff. The pride, power, and pleasure of one's own sexual being threatens cultural authority, unless it can be made into a commodity.'<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Hannah Wilke, 'Visual Prejudice', *American Women Artists* exhibition at Museo de Arte Contemporanea da Universidade de São Paulo, exhibition catalogue, 1980, Hannah Wilke Collection and Archive, Los Angeles, Uncatalogued.

The battle for authority over the female body during Schneemann and Wilke's era, however, is vastly distinct from that same battle today, precisely because of the differing cultural contexts between the 1960s, the 1970s, and the present day. One of the central concerns of this thesis, and of my performance work generally, is to resituate the controversy of the displayed female body within a contemporary context, interrogating the ways in which commodity capitalism, popular culture, and mass media have intervened, re-contextualized, and problematized the way we read that body, and feminism more generally. The post-feminist trend – which I discuss in detail later in this introduction – has produced a contemporary moment in which feminism is seen quite erroneously to be no longer necessary, while at the same time its lexicon has been appropriated and re-circulated within dominant culture, working to utilize feminism's vocabulary but undermine its political efficacy. My performances and complementary writing are interested in finding strategies to resist, challenge, and complicate this contemporary mainstream manifestation of feminism and its portrayal of the female body. This is precisely where my scholarly focus on strategies of 'negativity' emerges.

Part of the work of this project has been to ask a series of overarching research questions. How have we arrived at this post-feminist moment? What are the consequences of this post-feminist trend, and how is the female subject understood within this framework? How can the displayed female body access agency within this framework, which so often condemns it to either victimization or 'whoredom'? How can performance challenge this delineation of the female subject? What might performance be able to propose about female subjectivity through its resistance to this framework? And what might be the political potential of 'negativity' in performance regarding the displayed female body?

Therefore, I investigate the relationship between the displayed female body, its access to agency, and the critical potential of negativity through examining and creating



contemporary feminist performance. This thesis identifies how a particular strand of second-wave feminism within Anglo-American cultural contexts in the 1970s and 80s, namely the anti-porn faction, has been appropriated by dominant culture in the present, through which its most problematic tenets have been re-circulated and normalized. The association of feminism with being 'anti-men', 'anti-sex' and configuring women as victims, stems precisely from this distribution, leading to a backlash against feminism and the post-feminist trend, which I explain in chapter two through the writings of Susan Faludi, Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young. But this appropriation has also meant that female physical display is often construed as misogynist and strips the displayed body of its agency. While some factions have advocated alternative potentialities of the displayed body, like the sex-positive faction of second-wave feminism – typified by the writings of Pat Califia and Gayle Rubin – and various third-wave feminists– exemplified in works by Linda Williams, Lynne Segal, and Drucilla Cornell – the post-feminist trend and its espousal of commodity capitalism has rendered a situation in which the displayed female body is either posited as a 'whore' or a victim in dominant culture.<sup>8</sup>

Performance intervenes in the conversation between these factions, articulating the cultural politics of the displayed body, providing its own methods of criticality, and allowing for an elaboration of the potentials for contemporary feminism. The aim of my

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<sup>8</sup> In particular: Pat Califia, *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2000); Gayle S. Rubin, 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality', in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 137-81; Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power Pleasure and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1999); Lynne Segal, *Straight Sex: Rethinking the Politics of Pleasure* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); and Drucilla Cornell, *At the Heart of Freedom: Feminism, Sex, and Equality* (Princeton and Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1998).

research, then, is to seek alternative modes of agency for a displayed body within feminist discourse, as well as to perform both its potentialities and its critical limits. The following chapters outline this cultural problem and its consequences, proceeding with analyses of two performances I created, *Splat!* and *How to Become a Cupcake/The Famous' Adaptation of Frankenstein*, in order to examine strategic negativity as a mode through which alternative, messy, and 'incomplete' female subjectivities might arise in resistance to the post-feminist model.

### **Methodology and Scope**

It is of significant note that this introduction prefaces terms, histories, and issues that are much more robustly accounted for in later chapters, as the chapters themselves take up the task of contextualization and literature review in the development of my broader context of study, as well as the specific case studies. Key to my deployment of those case studies, and particularly those that are my own performances, is my engagement with a practice-based research methodology.

This thesis, which is grounded in practice-based research, aims to expand on existing scholarship and artistic practices on, about, and by feminist and performance-based scholars and practitioners. The thesis primarily includes video documentation and textual analysis of two of my performance works. The first, *Splat!*, premiered at The Barbican's Silk Street Theatre in April 2013 as the launch of SPILL Festival of Performance, London. The second, *How to Become a Cupcake/The Famous' Adaptation of Frankenstein* revisited an earlier performance (*How to Become a Cupcake*, 2010), and was performed at In Between Time, an international festival of performance and live art at the Arnolfini Auditorium, Bristol, in January 2013. I have chosen not to write about *How 2 Become 1* (2010) within this thesis, one of my larger works that toured throughout

2010 and 2011, specifically because it was not created during the course of my doctoral research. While it could certainly be analyzed within the same context as my other works, it was not developed within the same close relationship to the theoretical and contextual research generated for this thesis. While my analysis spreads across case studies from a selection of artists, rather than focusing entirely on my own practice, *Splat!* significantly comprises the primary text from which much of my research develops, and also in which it converges.

I am interested in performance as a methodology for investigative and critical research. The two performances I created during this research period within themselves constitute original contributions to knowledge. They act as self-sufficient research outcomes in themselves, undertaking, through performance, the research questions outlined earlier; moreover, they also constitute primary research material for the elaboration of the content of the written thesis. When used as research material for analysis in the written thesis, they act as self-reflective critical documents. These performances are both objects of analysis, as well as the analysis itself. They provide critique as well as material for critique. Performance-as-research produces in multiple and layered outcomes, acting as a valuable and productive research methodology. As Robin Nelson explains in *Practice as Research in the Arts* (2013), practice-based research is 'a multi-mode research inquiry',<sup>9</sup> through which practice itself can provide 'substantial evidence of new insights'.<sup>10</sup>

The critical thinking, and embodied research generated in creating and presenting my performances substantially impact my theoretical analyses and therefore my writing, just as my analyses and writing inform my performance practice. My process functions

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<sup>9</sup> Robin Nelson, *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

like a feedback loop, in which process produces outcomes, and vice-versa. I intend for the practical aspect of my research to stand alongside the textual research as an equally speculative, generative and philosophical product. Neither has the purpose of simply describing, reflecting, or justifying the other. The writing about my performances in no way intends to speak for it conclusively or reproduce the array of effects it might generate. As Nelson elucidates, 'writing may be helpful' in articulating the research inquiry or context of a practice-based PhD, but it 'is not to demand a verbal account of the practice'. Rather, he seeks 'a *resonance* between complementary writing and the praxis.'<sup>11</sup> In line with Nelson, I aim for the textual and the practical to weave through and inform the other, so that the writing individually acts and produces effects (and affects) that exceed the critical reach of the practice, and vice-versa.

Though a crucial limitation to practice-based research as a methodology is the lack of the possibility of critical distance, I aim to employ my performance works as texts within this project, analyzed on relatively equal footing with the other case studies, for the purpose of contextualizing my performance work alongside the other performance-texts discussed and within the theoretical framework of this project. I aim for my writing about my own practice to weave conceptually and theoretically through the writing about the other artistic practices, so that a textual conversation arises between the works. And while my relationship to these works will necessarily never be leveled, I use similar methodologies in my analysis of them, focusing particularly on artistic strategies and effects that work towards critical representations of female agency.

I do, however, use documentation of critical, popular and private responses to my work as evidence for the claims I make about how my performances make meaning, especially in troubling ways, much in the same way I've used correspondence and unpublished writing from the archives and papers of Wilke, Schneemann and Hershman.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

In the writing about my own practice, I choose not focus on process. This is, in part, to level out my analysis between the works, so that those for which I do not have access to process-based accounts are not read under a false comparison. More significantly, however, I choose not to focus on process because this project is primarily interested in *performative* representations of female agency. I am interested in the ways in which these alternative female subjectivities are *enacted* and *disseminated* through performance, for a public (whether that be live or through documentation). My process is also consistently hidden from the audience in public presentations, which is not always the case for performance practitioners. It is these circulated representations that hold weight here, rather than subjectivities that might be enacted in a more private, elite, or otherwise less accessible context, such as the artistic process.

In the case of Lynn Hershman's *Roberta Breitmore* (1974-79), a work I examine in chapter three, however, the process is simultaneously the work, in which Hershman concurrently lived as both 'herself' and as a fabricated persona, 'Roberta Breitmore', for five years.<sup>12</sup> And while this process-as-product will be analyzed as such, it is also a work made readable and visible through its accessible documentation. It is the enactment of Breitmore as an identity, and its readability through its various forms of documentation, which provide a critical source for analysis here.

One of the most valuable aspects of practice-based research particular to this project is the employment of performativity as a research methodology. The act of embodying my research – creating, enacting and practicing the alternative subjectivities in performance proposed by my research – crucially informs the research product,

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<sup>12</sup> Lynn Hershman Leeson is Lynn Hershman's married name, which she began using in the late 1990s. I've chosen to use 'Lynn Hershman' because that is the name under which she primarily exhibited until recently, and under which Roberta Breitmore was created, which constitutes one of the major case studies of this project.

critically contributing to the propositions made by this project. Nelson's deployment of the term 'doing-thinking' is in line with my use of performativity, in which he cites the significance of 'embodied knowledge' in practice-based research, whereby the *doing* performatively produces knowledge.<sup>13</sup> The concept of performativity underlies my deployment of performance in this research, as a phenomenon that has the potential to produce, generate, and create in the moment of its enactment. In line with what Judith Butler proposes, the performance aspect of this thesis is concerned with 'a politics of performative gender acts, one which both redescribes existing gender identities and offers a prescriptive view about the kind of gender reality there ought to be.'<sup>14</sup> The performance work of this thesis allows for an embodied resistance to the notion that 'to be a woman,' is to 'compel the body to conform to an historical idea of "woman."'<sup>15</sup> Rather than performatively reiterate norms of womanhood, my performance work is interested in performatively 'redescribing', or *re-inscribing*, new and alternative modes of subjectivity, a line of thinking I return to later in this introduction and throughout the thesis generally. Additionally, this thesis situates performance in a place between 'the real' and 'the constructed', so that the subjectivities I create and inhabit, while constructed, are also *really* – or 'really' – embodied, lived, and experienced, albeit onstage (in the realm of 'the fabricated'). The ambiguity between 'the real' and 'the constructed' in regards to female subjectivities in performance constitutes a significant line of deliberation in chapter four.

Additionally, in this case, this thesis has multiple forms of dissemination because of its dual outputs of both writing and performance, making the research, and the

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<sup>13</sup> Nelson, *Practice as Research in the Arts*, pp. 42-4, and pp. 56-60.

<sup>14</sup> Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory, in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. by Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), pp. 270-82 (p. 279).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 272.

alternative representations of female subjectivity, visible and accessible to a wider public. Approaching diverse forms of dissemination is a vital aspect of my practice outside of, and in addition to, this thesis, in which the sociological significance of visual culture is hugely considered.<sup>16</sup> The ways in which problematic representations of female subjectivities and agency, as well as feminism itself, are distributed and promoted in public visibility, underlies the urgency of my research. It is because of these highly visible, and highly problematic, representations that make this thesis necessary. Therefore, presenting this research publicly, in any form, becomes a mode through which its concerns are activated.

I am also interested in the divergent effects produced from these different forms of dissemination. My performance work appears to be chaotic, messy, and unprepared; on the contrary, the creation of the work is painstakingly precise and exacting. The way I speak and write about my practice seeks to reflect this rigour and precision, especially as I choose, as noted above, to conceal my process, which is where this meticulousness is performed. The authorial and academic voice that accompanies the way I write about my work in the chapters of this thesis – apart, perhaps, from the odd eruption of mischief in the writing about my performances – does not intend in any way to shut down its potential for multifarious readings and meanings, but to provide a counterpoint, among other purposes (for example, reaching a different audience; analysis; contextualization).

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<sup>16</sup> A segment on my work, and *Splat!* specifically, featured on *Woman's Hour*, BBC Radio 4, 27 March 2013 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01rggq3>>. Upcoming projects include: a graphic novel adaptation of *Splat!* entitled *Splat!: The Adventures of The Famous Little Bitch*, which will be published in 2016; a YouTube video project, provisionally titled *The Famous in the Streets*, in which The Famous interviews young people in the streets about feminism, which will be made public in 2016; and workshops in secondary schools exploring gender, sexuality, and feminism, also tentatively beginning in 2016.

There is a contrast in persona, here, in which The Famous, as performer, is projected as a 'messy slut'; while Lauren/The Famous, as academic, is projected as a 'meticulous scholar'. This contrast, reflected in my various practices, is a manifestation of precisely where this thesis begins. The ways in which female authority sits next to representations of the female body, in all its complexity and messiness, is the foundational point of departure for this research. Situating my various practices within this dilemma activates, challenges, and questions this assumed duality.

Apart from my own practice, I investigate the work of a number of other feminist practitioners, most particularly Lynn Hershman, whose work spans from the 1960s to the present. My choice to focus particularly on Hershman is due, firstly, to the way in which I believe her work has been proportionately left out of the discourse on feminist art and performance practices. Secondly, the strategies she deploys in her work, particularly the way in which she rigorously investigates the multiplicity of female subjectivity throughout the decades of her practice, I believe, remain particularly relevant in the 'post-feminist' cultural framework this project interrogates. My research into Hershman's archives, and my resultant writing on the significance of her practice in chapter three, constitutes a new contribution to criticism on Hershman's work.

My research on Hershman as I've indicated, as well as on Carolee Schneemann and Hannah Wilke, involved primary research, working with the artists' papers and archives. While as case studies Schneemann and Wilke are somewhat backgrounded in my research, their significance to its central questions and historical context remains indispensable. These artists and their work lay the groundwork for this project. My choice to research these three feminist artists who have been making work since the 1960s, as well as Marina Abramović who appears in chapter one, is strategic. Part of the drive of this project is to vocalize the urgency for a contemporary feminism. By recalling the questions women artists were asking in the 1960s and 70s, I aim to show that those



questions are still relevant, albeit contextually very different. My choice to research artists from this era is a deliberate strategy of posing my work as a contemporary and contextualized response, within the framework of today's post-feminist culture, to iconic works in performance from the 1960s and 70s and the questions that work posed. In chapter one, I briefly discuss the works of other contemporary artists, namely Ann Liv Young, GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN and Nao Bustamante, who work within a similar post-feminist framework as myself, in order to contextualize my practice and the strategies I deploy, marking my work within a lineage of feminist performance from the 1960s to the present.

My choice to use Abramović in chapter two, discussed alongside Vanessa Beecroft, is not only because her work stems from a similar history as the other artists in the thesis, but also because her more recent work has raised difficult or uncomfortable questions. Since Abramović's rise to celebrity status in the past few years – particularly since *Seven Easy Pieces* (2005) – her work, like Beecroft's body of work, poses a very similar question to the problem of post-feminism: are the displayed female bodies in these works reproducing the problem of the exploited, commodified female body, or are they critiquing it? The critical relevance of their work, given the political framework of this project, is aptly suited for interrogation within this thesis.

What this thesis perhaps leaves unanswered is the way in which contemporary feminism – and particularly post-feminism – mediates its own privilege, whereby non-white and trans bodies are often excluded from its scope. This thesis does not explicitly intervene in this problem, but fundamental to its approach is the distinction between 'sex, as biological facticity, and gender, as the cultural interpretation or signification of that facticity,' outlined here by Butler, whereby my use of the term 'woman' or 'female' is in no way limited to subjects with biologically female bodies, as the body 'is not

predetermined by some manner of interior essence' that defines one's gender identity.<sup>17</sup> That this thesis focuses on 'female bodies', however, might be considered problematic; but this thesis is interested in the way in which 'female bodies' have been deployed in mainstream culture as sedimented signs – of desire, of victimhood, of insatiability. While mainstream culture relies on, and exploits, the notion that the female body is 'expressive of a gender core or identity', this thesis is precisely interested in the ways in which the body (in and out of performance) can revise, refuse, and reject what is conventionally assigned to it, thereby unhinging mainstream culture's sedimentation of gender and sex.<sup>18</sup> Regarding racial privilege, while not part of the scope of this thesis, an interesting line of critique extending out of this research is the ways in which mainstream culture has appropriated non-white female bodies and further endowed them with signs of desire, victimhood, and insatiability – as well as exoticism, primitivism and animalism.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, the way in which racial difference is brushed over by popular culture, apart from its assimilation of fetishizable difference, e.g. by celebrating Beyoncé's larger-than-average behind – and redeploying that as a feminist stance on body image – is certainly a problematic line of inquiry that relates to this thesis, but falls outside its principal scope.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', p. 272.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 277.

<sup>19</sup> See 'After Us the Savage Goddess' and 'Seeing the Big Show' in Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London: Routledge. 1997), pp. 126-52, and pp. 153-73.

<sup>20</sup> See: bell hooks, 'Are You Still a Slave? Liberating the Black Female Body', bell hooks

Conversations and Dialogues, The New School, 6 May 2014

<<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/12/beyonce-bell-hooks-slave-terrorist>>

[accessed 20 September 2015]; Roxane Gay, 'Beyoncé's Control of her Own Image Belies the bell hooks "Slave" Critique', *The Guardian*, 12 May 2014

<<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/12/beyonce-bell-hooks-slave-terrorist>>

[accessed 20 September 2015]; Janell Hobson, 'Policing Feminism: Regulating the Bodies of

My theoretical research draws from a wide range of disciplines including performance studies, literary theory, feminist and queer studies, cultural affect theory, and psychoanalysis. I turn to psychoanalytic theories throughout this project in order to unpick modes of subject constitution and identity, because, like Jacqueline Rose (discussed below), I find psychoanalysis an ideal framework through which to examine subjectivity. I also choose to engage with this field because of its historical deployment in feminist theory. Although I will approach it via the writings of Judith Butler and Leo Bersani,<sup>21</sup> I don't necessarily position this project as psychoanalytic, therefore, but as one that utilizes and acknowledges psychoanalysis' impact on the field of feminist visual studies and performance studies.

Psychoanalysis lends itself to a discourse on subjectivity. As Jacqueline Rose explains, 'the question of identity – how it is constituted and maintained – is [...] the central issue through which psychoanalysis enters the political field.'<sup>22</sup> Rose writes, and I agree, that while psychoanalysis might describe 'how women experience the path to femininity, it also inserts [...] that femininity is neither simply achieved nor is it ever complete.' This, she explains, is what distinguishes psychoanalysis from its former, punitive usage, in its doctrinal uses of Freud, as an 'account of the internalisation of norms'.<sup>23</sup> Rose's analysis of the critical significance of psychoanalysis' delineation of the

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Women of Color', *Ms. Magazine* [blog], 10 June 2013

<http://msmagazine.com/blog/2013/06/10/policing-feminism-regulating-the-bodies-of-women-of-color/> [accessed 20 September 2015].

<sup>21</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1990).

<sup>22</sup> Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso Books, 1986), p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

fragmented subject is particularly useful for me. She explains, ‘for Lacan, psychoanalysis does not offer an account of a developing ego which is “not *necessarily* coherent”, but of an ego which is “necessarily *not* coherent”, that is, which is always and persistently divided against itself.’<sup>24</sup> The concept of subjectivity as fragmented within itself, she crucially explains, is significant to feminism, as it provides women with ‘the right to an impasse at the point of sexual identity’, meaning, it allows for the difficulty, the impossibility, of a coherent identity as a woman, without the requirement or ‘nostalgia’ for that identity’s potential ‘integration into a norm.’<sup>25</sup> She articulately explains,

Psychoanalysis becomes one of the few places in our culture where it is recognised as more than a fact of individual pathology that most women do not painlessly slip into their roles as women, if indeed they do at all.<sup>26</sup>

For Rose, and for me as well, psychoanalysis allows for identities to fail – indeed, it is the ontological function of identity to fail – and this makes it not only permissible but nearly unavoidable for identity to resist its normative or expected shapes. This line of thinking fiercely impacts, and is fiercely reflected within, my performance work. As I describe in depth in chapter four, my performances strategically makes use of identity’s constitutive failure in order to performatively enact alternative modes of femalehood that rely, not on coherence, but on fragmentation and multiplicity.

### **The Displayed Female Body and The Figure of The Whore**

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 93-4.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 90-1.

My use of the term 'displayed body' in the thesis title and throughout my writing is in line with Rebecca Schneider's deployment of the phrase 'explicit body', although slightly distinct. For Schneider, in *The Explicit Body in Performance* (1997), the use of the word 'explicit' is significant because of its various connotations – both referring to the supposed indecency of the exposed body as well as the rendering literal or 'explicating' that the explicit body in performance may accomplish. Schneider notes that this word comes from the Latin *explicare*, or 'unfolding', through which an artist might 'peel back layers of signification [...] bringing ghosts to visibility.' The artists she discusses, including Annie Sprinkle, Ann Magnuson, Carolee Schneemann and Karen Finley 'are interested in exposing not an originary, true, or redemptive body, but the sedimented layers of signification themselves.'<sup>27</sup>

Like Schneider's work, this project is interested in exposing layers of signification, particularly in exposing the multiple and multivalent layers of female subjectivity that do not work to reveal an essential or singular being, but to reveal a subjectivity that is never fully known, that is always citing and citational, teeming with overlapping and contradictory meanings. In Butler's words, 'gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed,' rather it is 'an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities, a complicated process of appropriation.'<sup>28</sup> The displayed body is a site of 'social markings', as Schneider writes, with 'signatures of gender, race, class, age, sexuality – all of which bear ghosts of historical meaning.'<sup>29</sup> The work that performance does within this thesis, as Butler calls for, is 'to expose the reifications that tacitly serve as substantial gender cores or identities, and to elucidate both the act and the strategy of disavowal which at once constitute and conceal gender

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<sup>27</sup> Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London: Routledge. 1997), p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', pp. 270-1.

<sup>29</sup> Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance*, p. 2.

as we live it.<sup>30</sup> Like Schneider's work, I am interested in unveiling the historical and cultural processes that constitute subject and gender construction.

The term 'display' has similar roots to 'explicit', also meaning 'to unfold' in late and medieval Latin. Its Latin root, *displicare*, means 'to scatter' or 'disperse', a meaning I find appealing to my discussion of multiplicity and dissonant subjectivities in and beyond performance.<sup>31</sup> I also find the term's more recent connotations of 'spectacle' or 'exhibition' useful, as the body I am investigating in this project is one that not only materializes in performance, but also a body that is otherwise *visible* and available for viewing. The displayed female bodies so often commodified and displayed in advertisements, mass media, and other parts of popular culture that make up our mainstream visual culture is similarly a body on display, a body rendered visible, exhibited for others to visually encounter and interpret.

My choice, though, to use 'display' rather than 'explicit' is primarily to distinguish nudity from sexuality and to neutralize the way that 'explicit' retains an integral sense of the indecency or obscenity of the naked body. In chapter two, I discuss the conflation of the naked female body with sex, violence, misogyny, and exploitation in anti-pornography feminist texts as problematically mirroring, and impacting, mainstream culture's association of the displayed female body with victimization. The term 'explicit' implies sexual indecency, and I would like to avoid this conflation of meanings.

My use of the term 'displayed female body' though, is also used in conversation with the figure of the whore throughout this project. Mainstream culture's common accusation that women who display their bodies are 'whores' or 'sluts' is problematic, as it allows for a conflation of nudity with sex, (supposed) degradation, and (supposed)

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<sup>30</sup> Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', p. 280.

<sup>31</sup> 'Display', in *Oxford English Dictionary: Volume 4*, ed. by James A.H. Murray Henry Bradley, W.A. Craigie, and C.T. Onions, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 815.

exploitation within dominant culture's lexicon. For this reason, an unpicking of the term 'whore' is largely relevant to this project.

The historical association between performance and prostitution also bears weight here, which I explore in much more detail in chapter two via Rebecca Schneider and Jennifer Doyle.<sup>32</sup> The historical link between actresses and whores, or dancers and whores, via professional overlap, but also because of their assumed position as 'objects onto which male desires were projected' or 'enacted', as Kirsten Pullen explains, additionally allowed for a kind of discursive slippage between the two, whereby, though professionally distinct, their roles within the lexicon of male desire are rendered analogous.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, the latent accusatory assumption that female performance artists who display their bodies are like whores, not only because of the association of whoring with performing, but because of the way in which mainstream culture, as I've just mentioned, reads the displayed body as whore-like, renders the term 'whore' a useful, albeit thorny, term for investigation.

In a letter received after my performance of *How to Become a Cupcake/The Famous' Adaptation of Frankenstein* at In Between Time Festival, the association of bodily display and exchange becomes apparent. In this letter, a displeased male audience member repeatedly refers to my bodily actions, particularly 'ramming things inside [my]

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<sup>32</sup> Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London: Routledge, 1997); Jennifer Doyle, *Sex Objects: Art and The Dialectics of Desire* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

<sup>33</sup> Kristen Pullen, *Actresses and Whores: On Stage and in Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) p. 2. Also see Tracey C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 78-86.

body and pissing on stage', as desperate attempts to gain attention and success.<sup>34</sup> This spectator refers to my actions as 'stooping', as doing anything I can in order to be 'successful' or 'become known'. This spectator implies that I am 'like a whore', or a 'celebrity-whore', by suggesting that I trade my body for success, notoriety, or material gain. He goes on to suggest that I must have been previously making 'better' work, and have now turned to these 'shameful' and 'desperate' attempts to gain attention. While his words might be harsh, there is something significant in his demands for an explanation, a justification for my choices. His insinuation that I must have been less shameful at some time signifies, I believe, a desire on his part for a redeemable, recuperable past of good-girl-ness – I couldn't *always* have been such a 'whore'. My innocence, as it were, must have been lost. Furthermore, the email itself acts a way to punish me, an attempt to inspire guilt and shame, or even remorse, for having enacted such whore-like activities. His particular choice of vocabulary, such as 'stooping low', referring to my work as 'derogatory', his accusation that I 'give art a bad name', or his accusation that I 'have stooped and become the lowest type of artist, [*sic*] the sign of desperation and weakness is something [to] be ashamed of,' equally implicates the displayed female body as something 'low', dirty, and shameful – notions that are historically associated with the figure of the prostitute, or whore.<sup>35</sup>

Throughout this thesis, my discussion on the figure of the whore is precisely a discussion on the whore as a *figure*, and of the cultural and sexual ideas attached to her representation. This thesis does not take up an account of the realities of sex work, its conditions, or its function as a form of labor throughout history or in a contemporary

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<sup>34</sup> [Name withheld], personal email correspondence to the author, [18 February 2013]. I have protected the anonymity of the author of the letter in accordance with guidance in Queen Mary's Research Ethics Policy.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.



setting. What I explore, particularly in chapter three, is, in Schneider's words, what the figure of the whore 'embodies', 'is emblematic of and threatening to.'<sup>36</sup>

I deploy the term 'whore' with the acknowledgment of its numerous derogatory connotations, and intend to reclaim the political potency of the figure of the whore through problematizing, and indeed, embracing, some of her 'offensive' associations because of the way in which I, along with Schneider and Kristen Pullen, reframe that which deems her a source of derogation as that which makes her critically threatening.

Historically, the threat of the whore is associated with dirt, disease, and infection, as well as poverty and 'low' class, much like the spectator of my show implies in his letter. As Pullen writes, 'in the Victorian era, the prostitute was a contaminant, spreading venereal disease and sexual immorality to middle-class women.'<sup>37</sup> For Bersani, it is insatiability that represents the whore's semiotic threat. For Bersani, 'the Victorian representation of prostitutes [...] explicitly criminalize[s] what is merely a consequence of a more profound or original guilt,' namely 'the inherent aptitude of women for uninterrupted sex.'<sup>38</sup> While he states, 'the realities of syphilis in the nineteenth century and of AIDS today "legitimate" a fantasy of female sexuality as intrinsically diseased', promiscuity, he says, is 'the sign of infection', through which the destructive quality of the prostitute's insatiability is enacted.'<sup>39</sup>

The notion that what is threatening about the whore is the perception of female insatiability and her body's aptitude for promiscuity is potentially convincing, particularly when we look at the way in which that same insatiability is constantly commodified,

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<sup>36</sup> Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance*, p. 5 and p. 7.

<sup>37</sup> Pullen, *Actresses and Whores*, p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?: And Other Essays* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009) p. 17.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

contained, and sold through the popular representation of female bodies. It is a quality that is both desired and feared, and rendered somewhat containable and unthreatening through its commodification. However, Bersani's configuration of the figure of the whore in *The Culture of Redemption* (1990) as insatiable becomes exceptionally thorny, as it leads to an essentialist and eroticized view of female sexuality, as I take issue with in much more depth in chapter three.<sup>40</sup>

What I believe really underlies the danger of the whore, however, is *not* her supposed insatiability, as Bersani suggests, but her dialectical position as both commodity and seller, both subject and object, as discussed by Schneider in relationship to Walter Benjamin, as well as Pullen,<sup>41</sup> which I expand upon in chapter three. The figure of the whore, I argue, is threatening because of her position as double, as multiple, and as indeterminate. It is a kind of promiscuity, but not the essentializing notion Bersani indicates, which seems to imply the inherent insatiability of all women. Instead, I deploy the notion that the figure of the whore is not fixed or singular, but, through a kind of representational promiscuity, challenges her position as either the victimized commodity and/or the empowered businesswoman. She represents both, and it is this dialectical position that I will argue deems her threatening and critical.

### **'Love for a Prostitute': Contextualizing the Victim and the Whore**

Mainstream culture's delineation of the whore as sexual aggressor (used derogatively), or 'victim', stems, in part, from the dialectical, and controversial, position of the figure of the whore. In an evening of performances called *Soup and Tart* at The Kitchen in New York

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<sup>40</sup> Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 69.

<sup>41</sup> Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance*, p. 107; and Pullen, *Actresses and Whores*, p. 5.

in 1974, Wilke performed her famous piece *Super-t-Art*, transforming herself from whore (Mary Magdalene) to a crucified female Christ through various poses.<sup>42</sup> As Wilke acknowledges in her notes about her performance, the figure of ‘the virgin’ and ‘the whore’ continue to dominate perceptions of female sexuality.<sup>43</sup> In this section I will contextualize the virgin-whore complex through Freudian psychoanalysis in order to provide a contextual background for my engagement with a *victim*-whore complex, which I return to momentarily within this introduction and expand on in depth in chapter two. While, as explained above, psychoanalysis lends itself to a discourse on subjectivity, it has also significantly impacted discourses on femininity and sexuality – as both productive and problematic. Feminist critics of Freud such as Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, for example, provide crucial texts that problematize Freud’s writings on the subject.<sup>44</sup> However, what is important here is not necessarily the loyal recounting of Freud’s ideas, nor a detailed unpicking and problematizing of them – it is its popular circulation which here bears weight, for it highly impacts the way female sexuality is discussed within mainstream and popular media.

The virgin-whore, or ‘Madonna-whore,’ complex stems from Freud’s analysis of men’s ‘behavior in love’, through which, he describes, there is a ‘type’ attracted to ‘a woman who is in some way or other of bad repute sexually, whose fidelity and reliability

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<sup>42</sup> There is also a photographic work with the same title, which was made in conjunction with the performance.

<sup>43</sup> Hannah Wilke, ‘Super-t-Art’, *Collective Consciousness*, 1974, Hannah Wilke Collection and Archive, Los Angeles, Uncatalogued.

<sup>44</sup> Particularly: Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. by H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989); Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. by Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); and Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. by Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

are open to some doubt.<sup>45</sup> He refers to this tendency as 'love for a prostitute.'<sup>46</sup> Men of 'this type', he argues, oppose 'normal' love behavior, in which 'the woman's value is measured by her sexual integrity, and is reduced by any approach to the characteristic of being like a prostitute.'<sup>47</sup> Rather than the virgin, Freud implies, this man desires the whore. Part of this tendency, he describes, is an urge to 'rescue' his woman of choice, because 'without him she would lose all moral control and rapidly sink to a lamentable level.'<sup>48</sup> The desire to save the whore from 'losing control' and 'sinking' even further into moral degradation is a redemptive tendency, an attempt at recuperating or salvaging a kind of innocence. Interestingly, within this line of thinking, even when a man's desire expresses itself as 'love for a prostitute', the latent wish driving his desire is for the prostitute's redeemed purity.

The source of this behavior, Freud continues, is the 'infantile fixation of tender feelings on the mother' that have lasted beyond puberty, resulting in a choice of 'love-objects' on which 'the maternal characteristics remain stamped', becoming 'easily recognizable mother-surrogates.'<sup>49</sup> The choice of prostitute-like lovers, he acknowledges, is certainly seemingly out-of-tune with the 'mother-complex', as one's conscious thought would associate their mother with 'unimpeachable moral purity', namely the Madonna or

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<sup>45</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men (Contributions to the Psychology of Love 1)' in *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, ed. by Angela Richards, trans. by James Strachey (London, New York, Victoria, Auckland, and Toronto: Penguin Books, 1991), pp. 227-42 (p. 232).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 233-4.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

the virgin.<sup>50</sup> But, as he explains, the ego often sets up as a dichotomous pair what the unconscious mind sees as united.<sup>51</sup> 'Mother' and 'prostitute', he then explains, are linked in the subject's unconscious through his first experiences with learning about sex. In first learning about 'the sexual relations between adults,' Freud explains, the child's acknowledgment of his own parents' participation is often rejected. Around the same time of development, Freud argues, boys learn about 'the existence of certain women who practice sexual intercourse as a means of livelihood, and who are for this reason held in general contempt.'<sup>52</sup> With his new knowledge of whores, Freud continues, the boy can no longer convince himself that his parents are exempt from participating in sexual activity (a connection I find rather tenuous). He then comes to the conclusion, as he describes, 'that the difference between his mother and a whore is not after all so very great, since basically they do the same thing.'<sup>53</sup> From here, Freud, argues, he begins to desire his mother, fantasize about her, and seek her surrogates in his choice of potential lovers.

The theory from which much of these highly circulated ideas on the Madonna-whore complex derive is in part the prostitute/mother complex described above, as well as Freud's additional theory on 'psychical impotence.' Freud's depiction of men who suffer from 'psychical impotence', i.e. men who can physically become erect but often fail to do so due to 'psychical' obstacles, speaks towards the division between the virgin and the whore.<sup>54</sup> Many men who suffer from this problem, he explains, experience a kind

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 236.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 236.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 237.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 238.

<sup>54</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love (Contributions to the Psychology of Love 2)', in *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of*

of love divided between the 'sacred and profane.' He describes, 'where they love they do not desire and where they desire they cannot love.'<sup>55</sup> The inability to sexually desire the woman he respects, but the ability to become aroused for the 'debased sexual object' is the result of such a complex. He cannot achieve the 'perverse' satisfaction he requires with his 'well-brought-up wife', and must find 'a woman who is ethically inferior' with which to 'unreservedly' achieve satisfaction. He observes that the tendency of 'men of the highest classes of society to choose a woman of a lower class' is precisely the result 'of their need for a debased sexual object, to whom, psychologically, the possibility of complete satisfaction is linked.'<sup>56</sup>

While Freud's delineation of sexual development has obviously been debated in relevant discourse and provides substantial basis for feminist critique, what's most significant about understanding his theories in this context, particularly the 'Madonna-whore' complex, is that their prevalent circulation within dominant culture have rendered them considerably influential. His writings on this complex are minor in comparison to many other subjects he writes about, occupying only a few pages of his prolific work.

The widespread popular notion, circulated heavily within mass media and pop culture, that men never marry the woman who sleeps with them on the first date, stems precisely from this concept.<sup>57</sup> Women are often advised to 'wait', so that their desired partner doesn't see them as 'a whore', and therefore lose respect for them. Equally,

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*Sexuality and Other Works*, ed. by Angela Richards, trans. by James Strachey (London, New York, Victoria, Auckland, and Toronto: Penguin Books, 1991), pp. 243-60 (p. 247).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 251.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 254.

<sup>57</sup> 'First Date Tips... From Guys', *Cosmopolitan* <<http://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/advice/g2385/first-date-tips-from-guys/?slide=5>> [accessed 15 August 2015].

women in long-term heterosexual relationships or marriage are often encouraged to ‘try something kinky’ in bed, in order to retain their partner’s sexual interest.<sup>58</sup> This complex that sets the whore and the virgin as dichotomous figures of female sexuality has become – and remains – a widespread cultural complex, intervening in mainstream notions of sexuality that circulate in popular culture and mass media. That the issue is rarely problematized within mainstream culture and often repeated allows it to continue to bear cultural weight.

It is partly to this cultural tendency that this project responds, but rather than a *virgin-whore* complex, this project is concerned with a *victim-whore* complex. Like Freud’s theory suggests, desire for the whore often acts in conjunction with the desire to save, or redeem, the whore. In both chapters one and two, I indicate that this is a cultural tendency that aims to recuperate some kind of phantasmatic virginal innocence for the whore by rendering her a victim, in order to relieve her of the blame and guilt of her ‘degrading’ ways. As Bersani briefly states, “‘purity’ is crucial here: behind the brutalities against gays, against women, and in the denial of their very nature and autonomy [...] lies the [...] redemptive project.”<sup>59</sup> In that recuperation, in that attempt to bring forth the ‘pure’ woman from a fictional past, is an attempt to redeem the ‘failure’, the crisis, of the

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<sup>58</sup> ‘Tips to Spice Up Your Relationship,’ *Cosmopolitan* <<http://www.cosmopolitan.co.uk/love-sex/relationships/tips/g300/tips-to-spice-up-your-relationship/?slide=16>> [accessed 15 August 2015]; Gail Ross, ‘Why Doesn’t He Want to Have Sex with Me?’, *Huffington Post*, 2 April 2014 <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-gail-gross/why-doesnt-he-want-to-have-sex-with-me\\_b\\_5072472.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-gail-gross/why-doesnt-he-want-to-have-sex-with-me_b_5072472.html)> [accessed 15 August 2015]; Kristina Marchant, ‘What to Do If Your Man Says “No” to Sex (1 of 2)’, *Your Tango* <<http://www.yourtango.com/experts/ms-kristina-marchant/what-do-if-he-wont-have-sex-you>> [accessed 15 August 2015].

<sup>59</sup> Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?*, p. 29. Key to Bersani’s essay, and the reason he cites both gay men and women here, is his argument that the threat of both (and the core of phobic attacks) resides in the mutual horror of penetrability that both kinds of bodies apparently signify.

whore. As a victim, the whore is innocent. But more so, I argue, the cultural tendency to redeem the whore is driven by the desire to strip her of her agency. I expand on this in more detail in the first half of the thesis, particularly in chapter two, where I deploy Bersani's concept of 'the culture of redemption' to support my theory.

### **Post-feminism: A Rejection and a Redefinition**

Throughout this thesis, I make reference to 'mainstream' or 'dominant' culture as the mode through which post-feminism is distributed and maintained. Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris are resistant to the divisions between feminisms that my distinctions might imply. They discuss the notion that feminism of the 1960s and 70s might have arisen in opposition to dominant culture, and that a distinction between feminism and popular culture has emerged, but that those sorts of distinctions might be problematic. They explain:

It seems to us that remarking a 'divide' between feminisms 'inside' and 'outside' the academy, like notions of generations, 'waves' and/or the prefix 'post' [...] tend not only to obscure the heterogeneity that has always existed within feminism but emphasize division and difference at the expense of potential similarities and continuities. As such these arguments can foreclose possibilities for different sorts of feminisms/feminists making common cause by constructing feminism as if it were primarily an identity category to be claimed and disputed, rather than a *politics* concerned with changing 'things'.

Similar to Aston and Harris, Joanne Hollows, in *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture*, describes the way in which these divisions produce a situation in which



'feminists' are deemed intelligent, educated and conscious of the dominant forces of mass culture, by which 'ordinary women' are seen as duped.<sup>60</sup> She voices similar skepticism of these divisions in the way in which she defines 'the popular'. She arrives at her preferred definition through Stuart Hall, in which popular culture is defined as 'a site of struggle, a place where conflicts between dominant and subordinate groups are played out', as opposed to 'the means by which dominant groups impose their ideas on subordinate groups.'<sup>61</sup> In her definition, Hollows indicates that, rather than understood as a dominant force over 'ordinary' people's lives, popular culture is a site of negotiation and change, in which 'meaning-making' and forms of resistances might occur. She emphasizes the significance of 'the activities of these "ordinary women" as they engage in meaning-making practices; the pleasure involved in these practices; or the potential for resistance which might be present in the use of mass-produced commodities.'<sup>62</sup>

Angela McRobbie, however, questions this way of thinking and particularly feminist cultural studies' deployment of it, in *The Aftermath of Feminism*. She argues that rather than being concerned with the structures and dynamics of obstruction and power, this mode of thinking celebrates its connections to 'the ordinary woman', who, she explains, creates what *seem* to be 'autonomous pleasures of enjoyable femininity' from what consumer culture has made available.<sup>63</sup> But, as she continues,

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<sup>60</sup> Joanne Hollows, *Feminism, Femininity, and Popular Culture* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 26 and p. 35.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>63</sup> Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change* (London: Sage Publications, 2009), p. 3.

If this could be done with what capitalism made available, then there seemed to be no real reason to challenge the principles upon which capitalism was based. Just how oppositional were these seemingly subversive practices? [...] What value did they deliver to women in the context of the relations of power and powerlessness within which they still found themselves inscribed? [...] Does capitalism actually give women more or less what they want, if indeed it provides them with such cheap and available narrative pleasure, in the form of popular entertainment, which also now incorporate something like a feminist agenda into their plots and story lines? What need might there be for a feminist politics at all, if women could simply subvert the meanings of the goods and the values of the dominant cultural world around them?<sup>64</sup>

As McRobbie describes, this particular line of thinking, which celebrates the daily resistances of 'ordinary women' within the space of commodity capitalism, seems to dampen critique. Not only does she question where the space for critique might be in this line of thinking, but she continues by calling into question commodity capitalism's appropriation and distribution of what *appears* to be feminist, but serves another agenda altogether, namely capitalism itself. The relationship between popular culture and commodity capitalism, as McRobbie sets forward, actually works towards dismantling feminism. And it is through this guise, entitled 'post-feminism', that this dismantling is done. I discuss this in further detail in the following section.

Rosalind Gill, in *Gender and the Media*, further demonstrates how the media, such as advertising, television, magazines, books, films, and the music industry, works in conjunction with commodity capitalism to elaborate popular feminism.<sup>65</sup> And it is this

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>65</sup> Rosalind Gill, *Gender and the Media* (Malden, MA and Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

relationship between commodity capitalism, mass media and popular culture, through which I define 'mainstream' or 'dominant' culture within the cultural context of post-feminism throughout this thesis.

Furthermore, Lauren Berlant, in her explanation of 'women's culture', discussed in further depth later in the introduction as a parallel framework to post-feminism, repeatedly describes the way in which 'women's culture' 'survives [...] because markets revitalize it constantly in all media', emphasizing the way in which it is elaborated through commodity culture.<sup>66</sup> She notes that 'this commodity world and the ideology of normative, generic-but-unique femininity' marketed by the sphere of women's culture produces 'mass-mediated identity' through which conventionality, not difference, is sold. Berlant suggests that the phenomenon at work in the marriage of the media and the market, i.e. dominant culture itself, produces conformity.

It is through difference and alterity, however, not conventionality, that this thesis lays its ground. Whilst acknowledging the problems the divisions I make might bring to light, it is for this reason – for the significance of alterity – as well as the significance of critique as indicated by McRobbie, that I retain distinct accounts of the critical feminism deployed throughout this thesis and post-feminism's familiarity with mainstream, or dominant, culture.

Mainstream cultural conceptions of female sexuality and the deployment of the female body in popular and mainstream culture inevitably leads me to an account of post-feminism itself, which constitutes the central contextual framework for this thesis. Post-feminism has been defined in many ways, and it has become a key mode for

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<sup>66</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 7-8.

approaching the challenges in theatre and performance by women.<sup>67</sup> Most significantly, though, post-feminism is expressed as a cultural tendency to reject second-wave feminism, or feminism altogether, but deploy feminist terminology, such as 'empowerment' and 'choice'. As Ariel Levy explains, this brand of feminism is both a 'generational rebellion',<sup>68</sup> as well as a misguided attempt to continue the work of feminism.<sup>69</sup> This contemporary embrace of 'empowerment' is a mode through which feminism is both rejected and resituated. In the context of theatre and performance, Aston and Harris define post-feminism in a particularly useful way, by indicating the often-contradictory terms used to define it:

In *both* the UK and the US, the term postfeminism is used variously to indicate an anti-feminist backlash that saw its appropriation, inoculation and depoliticisation by a hostile mass media, *or* to indicate that feminism has done its job and is no longer needed by 'today's young women', *or* a revision 'within' feminism that addresses vital 'blind spots' and flaws of 'older' feminist thinking. Whatever their 'currency', both 'third wave' and postfeminism tend to be identified as starting

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<sup>67</sup> See: Geraldine Harris, 'Post-postfeminism? Amelia Bullmore's *Di and Viv and Rose*, April de Angelis's *Jumpy* and Karin Young's *The Awkward Squad*', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 24,2 (2014), 177-91; Louise Owen, '"Work that Body": Precarity and Femininity in the New Economy', *TDR: The Drama Review*, 56,4 (2012), 78-94; and Sarah Gorman, '"Do We Have a Show for You? Yes, We Have Got a Show for You!": Sexual Harassment, GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN and the (Re)Appraisal of Postmodern Irony', *Performance Research*, 19,2 (2014), 25-34.

<sup>68</sup> Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and The Rise of Raunch Culture* (New York: Free Press, 2005), p. 74.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

somewhere around 1990; are defined 'against' or in opposition to the second wave of the 1960s and 1970s, and are stated in 'generational' terms.<sup>70</sup>

In *The Happy Stripper: Pleasures and Politics of the New Burlesque*, Jacki Willson provides useful definitions of the various forms 'post-feminism' – and 'postfeminism' – has taken. She makes a distinction between the hyphenated and the non-hyphenated terms in order to clarify that one is 'a movement forward from the second wave for the next generation of women,' while the other is a form of 'disregard[ing] and disrespect[ing] the work achieved by second wave feminism.'<sup>71</sup> For Willson, her first definition – 'post-feminism' – is also third-wave feminism, taken up in the 1990s, as she describes. The other – 'postfeminism' – is 'a new generation of young women who completely disassociate themselves from the goals of the second-wave', separating themselves with the prefix 'post' from the past.<sup>72</sup>

At times, then, post-feminism is defined as a rejection of feminism itself, and particularly as resistant to second-wave feminism.<sup>73</sup> At other times it is equated with third-wave feminism (or even a fourth-wave). It is defined in different places as the future of feminism, and in others as a rejection of feminism, and sometimes as a rejection of its past as well as its aspirations for the future. While Willson's distinction between the forms

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<sup>70</sup> Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris, *A Good Night Out for the Girls: Popular Feminisms in Contemporary Theatre and Performance* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), p. 6. Emphasis in original.

<sup>71</sup> Jacki Willson, *The Happy Stripper: Pleasures and Politics of the New Burlesque* (London and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), pp. 8-9.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>73</sup> Also, see: Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris, 'Feminist Futures and the Possibility of "We"?', in *Feminist Futures* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), pp. 1-16.

post-feminism have taken is useful, I argue that post-feminism (or 'postfeminism') is actually the way in which those two forms sit together, through which the terms of feminism are both rejected *and* re-defined. Throughout this thesis, I define post-feminism as a doubling – a rejection of feminism based on the appropriation by dominant culture of second-wave anti-porn feminist's most problematic claims; *and* a misguided embracing of second-wave sex-positive feminism. For this reason, I do not make a distinction between post- and postfeminism.

As I argue in chapter two, the appropriation by dominant culture of anti-porn feminism's most difficult claims is the ground on which many young women reject feminism. The most problematic tenets of anti-porn feminism have been prolifically circulated within pop culture and made further problematic by its narrow and reductive appropriations. As Janelle Reinelt discusses in 'Navigating Postfeminism: Writing Out of the Box', numerous critics of second-wave feminism, including Rene Denfeld, Katie Roiphe and Naomi Wolf have 'claimed that feminism has portrayed women as victims,' elaborating that there is a widespread 'perception that [second-wave] feminists indulge in an unwarranted discourse of victimization' in contemporary culture.<sup>74</sup> In chapter two, I aim to show how the logic of victimization that demonizes physical display as misogynist and strips the displayed female body of its potential agency stems from the history of the anti-porn faction. This appropriated logic, I argue, plays a hand in the backlash against feminism, which is one particular account of post-feminism as described above. But the emergence of post-feminism is equally owed to the development of the sexual revolution and its overlapping history with the sex-positive faction of feminism.

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<sup>74</sup> Janelle Reinelt, 'Navigating Postfeminism: Writing Out of the Box,' in *Feminist Futures?*, ed. Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), pp. 17-33 (p. 19).

Throughout the 1960s, feminism and the sexual revolution had many overlapping goals, in which the political significance of sexual freedom was valued by both movements. Many feminist achievements were equally celebrated by both movements, such as the FDA approval of the birth control pill in 1960, the legalization of abortion in the 1973 case *Roe v. Wade*, and the publication of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* in 1970, among many others.<sup>75</sup> But these two movements, who shared many causes and many members, experienced a major rift, in part because of the Sex Wars of the 1970s, when the anti-pornography faction of feminism gained traction, as discussed in chapter two. The rift however, was not just between the anti-pornography movement and the sexual revolutionists, who saw the anti-porn movement as puritanical and repressive.<sup>76</sup> The sex-positive feminists also found themselves politically and ideologically at a distance from the sexual revolution. As Ariel Levy explains, when Hugh Hefner founded the glossy porn magazine *Playboy* in 1953, he was a predominant figure in the sexual revolution, combating American culture's 'ferocious antisexuality', as he put it, and even funding major feminist fights such as the legalization of the birth control pill and *Roe v. Wade*.<sup>77</sup> He also identified as a feminist himself.<sup>78</sup>

However, Hefner's brand of sexual liberation configured women as sexual objects to be consumed by men, falsely distributed, particularly at the time, as sexual liberation for everyone. Hefner's sexual revolution was perfectly situated within (stereo)typical male desire, and female pleasure only materialized as the pleasure of pleasing others – precisely what the anti-porn feminists criticized.

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<sup>75</sup> Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, p. 53.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

Furthermore, the growth of the sexual revolution was strongly tied to consumer capitalism, through which figures like Hefner began to commodify sex and the idea of sexual freedom. As Elisa Glick explains, 'the "swinging sixties" and its ethos of sexual ecstasy can be traced to the hegemony of "sexual revolution" that emerged in the 1950s in conjunction with a new material logic engendered by the culture of commodity production.'<sup>79</sup>

The brand of sexuality and sexual freedom arising from *Playboy* and other similarly minded pro-sex phenomena have been re-circulated heavily within dominant culture, and have been gravely confused with the sex-positive feminist movement, particularly because of their historical overlap, and mainly through popular culture and mass media. For Levy, this confusion has led to the conflation of 'conflicting ideologies,' which, she sustains, have come together to 'form one incoherent brand of raunch feminism.'<sup>80</sup> For Glick, the distinction between sex-positive feminism and the sexual revolution was not quite as distinct, in that, for her, both took the form of displacing 'the political onto the sexual by framing the pursuit of sexual pleasure in the vocabulary of revolutionary social change.'<sup>81</sup> What both Levy and Glick seem to point to, though, is the way in which modes of 'revolutionary change' have been subsumed by the realm of sexuality. Regardless of whether sex-positive feminism itself led us to this problem, as Glick implies throughout her essay, what concerns me throughout this thesis is the way in which pro-sex phenomena are circulated within dominant culture as empowering, whether they are indeed 'revolutionary' (or feminist), or misogynist.

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<sup>79</sup> Elisa Glick, 'Sex Positive: Feminism, Queer Theory, and the Politics of Transgression', *Feminist Review*, 64 (2000), 19-45 (p. 26).

<sup>80</sup> Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, p. 74.

<sup>81</sup> Glick, 'Sex Positive', p. 26.



I argue that the rejection of the problematic anti-porn tenets ('victimizing', 'anti-sex', anti-men') manifests as an embracing of pop culture's misguided appropriation of sex-positive feminism and the sexual revolution, resulting in an individualistic ideology that celebrates 'choice' and 'empowerment', regardless of its potentially misogynist outcomes. The rejection of feminism based on its supposed prudery, however, is also the terms on which post-feminism is based. The displayed female body in particular has become the site of this 'liberation', whereby young women are encouraged to express an overt and commodified sexuality, which is then equated with individuality and empowerment.

### **Post-feminism and Agency**

Post-feminism's relationship with the aspects of the sexual revolution that have been taken up by dominant popular culture has inevitably led to what Levy refers to as 'raunch feminism'. The phenomenon of women attending strip clubs, reading *Playboy*, and dressing in highly sexualizing attire, is seen as a kind of empowerment, whereby there is no need to worry about misogyny or objectification anymore. To be 'one of the guys', to enjoy what they enjoy, is seen as the culminating achievement of equality. The 'Female Chauvinist Pig' Levy writes about is the woman who 'make[s] sex objects of other women and ourselves', like her male counterparts.<sup>82</sup> But the most defining element of post-feminism, it seems, is its close relationship – too close, in my opinion – with popular culture and commodity capitalism. As Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young explain, however, that close relationship may be strategic. The purpose of that relationship, they argue, is to '[call] into question the role of the popular media in young women's lives

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<sup>82</sup> Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, pp. 3-4.

[and employ] the media itself to initiate reflection and critique.<sup>83</sup> They view popular culture and mass media, such as mainstream films like *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), the HBO series *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), and even magazines like *Bust*, as a way to 'engage young women in issues directly relevant to women's lives.'<sup>84</sup> Part of that relationship, they describe, involves the 'deliberate appropriation of terms' from feminism, redeployed in popular culture, which, they admit, 'would have made second-wave feminists cringe.'<sup>85</sup>

But this appropriation is something I – not of the second-wave generation, but someone possibly of the authors' generation or younger – also find troubling. In her discerning critique of post-feminism in *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009), Angela McRobbie makes a valuable observation, namely that the proliferation of feminist vocabulary in various methods of popular distribution allows for potentially anti-feminist phenomena to continue under the protective hood of post-feminism. She writes:

Drawing on a vocabulary that includes words like 'empowerment' and 'choice', these elements [of feminism] are then converted into a much more individualistic discourse, and they are deployed in this new guise, particularly in media and popular culture, but also by agencies of the state, as a kind of substitute for feminism.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, 'Chicks, Girls, and Choice: Redefining Feminism', *Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue* (June 2006), 87-97 (p. 93).

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>86</sup> McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, p. 1.

In appropriating feminist vocabulary – for example ‘empowerment’, ‘choice’, ‘self-esteem’, ‘confidence’ – the commercial sector in particular, but other systems and institutions as well, promotes the construction of this new mode of womanhood, in which the female subject is one of capacity, driven and empowered by her individualistic access to ‘choice’. McRobbie argues that the lure of individualistic ‘empowerment’ is indeed a guise for misogyny, whereby institutions, government agencies, or other capitalist-driven systems, exploit feminist ideals to serve their own economic agendas, removing the threat of feminism in its wake.

McRobbie presents the idea that a ‘new sexual contract’ for young women in the West invites them to ‘come forward and make good use of the opportunity to work, to gain qualifications, to control fertility and to earn enough money to participate in the consumer culture’.<sup>87</sup> With these capacities at hand, ‘contemporary modes of feminine citizenship’ are developed and defined. McRobbie continues by explaining that because ‘the dynamics of regulation and control are less about what young women ought not to do, and more about what they can do’, and because the ideals deployed to young women are centered around ‘capacity, success, attainment, enjoyment, entitlement, social mobility, and participation’,<sup>88</sup> there is an assumed pretext that women have already ‘won the battle for equality, they have gained recognition as subjects worthy of governmental attention and this has replaced any need for the feminist critiques of [...] hegemonic masculinities’.<sup>89</sup> One of the defining features of the new sexual contract, she writes, is precisely this disavowal of feminist critique. McRobbie explains that gender is restabilized, in part, through what Jean-Luc Nancy calls the ‘pretences of equality’,<sup>90</sup> in

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

which young women are given capacities, or indeed, accesses to agency, which actually undermine feminism itself. Because it is suggested that feminism is no longer needed, the injustices of patriarchy are given space to blossom again, more easily done behind the prolifically propagated notion that young women are free to choose, do and become.

Additionally, the post-feminist endorsement of these modes of individualistic capacity-acquirement, she argues, has created a kind of 'feminism' in which agency is defined by a voluntaristic conception of individual will, allowing structural and institutional modes of gender hierarchy to re-establish themselves. This thesis is concerned with defining the term 'agency' as a mode through which the post-feminist model of individual will is actually resisted. I take this up further in the next section. Pop-feminism's appropriation of this 'affirmative' or 'empowering' vocabulary, therefore, often undoes its self-declared aims of affirming the subject by obscuring a cultural situation that actually strips those subjects of their agency.

While McRobbie's views might initially seem uncompromising, Rosalind Gill suggests that this perspective 'is a useful corrective to the view which sees advertising as "becoming feminist" or simply "reflecting" feminist ideas.'<sup>91</sup> Gill observes the development of 'commodity feminism' in advertising, which makes use of feminism's cultural impact to tame its critique of the advertising industry and the media more generally.<sup>92</sup> She echoes McRobbie in her assertion that the sites of this distribution, such as women's magazines, promote the affirmative 'can-do' mentality, distributing the notion that the 'empowered' female subject can 'achieve anything'.<sup>93</sup> Through their suggestions and 'helpful hints', or 'cheats', magazines like *Cosmopolitan* or *Glamour* promise 'individual transformation' and success to young women, from appearance, to

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<sup>91</sup> Gill, *Gender and the Media*, p. 95.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 199.

career, to sex life. While this kind of integration of feminist vocabulary might be celebrated by third-wave or post-feminists like Ferriss and Young, one of its major pitfalls is the abandonment of the political significance of the language it appropriates.

As Gill points out, these notions of transformation and affirmation, while borrowed from feminism's lexicon, are, in this new context, removed completely from the political register. It is used here not only as a mode of personal betterment within quite narrow and self-serving parameters, but also as a way to sell a product. As Gill writes, 'the positive tone which feminism used to address women is, then, taken up and offered back to us on condition that we buy the commodity being sold.'<sup>94</sup> A rather poignant and slightly disturbing example she gives is of quite a direct appropriation from feminism's lexicon. In as early as 1986, an advertisement for a UK holiday company specializing in party holidays for young people used the pro-choice campaign slogan, 'a woman's right to choose' as a way of marketing their choice of holidays.<sup>95</sup> Here, we have the appropriation of feminist vocabulary, used to encourage their female consumers through a language of affirmation, but with an utter lack of recognition of its significantly political context. Through these kinds of messages, the language of affirmation is deployed and the political register is abandoned. The cultural framework that reiterates this mode of 'success' removes the concept of agency from the political sphere. Agency, empowerment, or affirmation, firstly, becomes an expression of individualistic will, in which socio-political relationships and consequences have no bearing or significance. Agency, then, becomes a way to justify individualist choices that are often misogynist and work to disavow the cultural significance and political necessity of feminism.

Levy describes this problematic effect of post-feminist ideology in another way, whereby various modes of empowerment are equalized– 'stripping,' she writes, becomes

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

'as valuable to elevating womankind as gaining an education or supporting rape victims.'<sup>96</sup> The sexualized mode of empowerment through stripping is equated with the same kind of agency as modes of political resistance or action. These terms, like 'empowerment' or 'liberation', Levy writes, 'once referred to bucking the system', whereas now they 'have since been drained of meaning.'<sup>97</sup> Just as McRobbie and Gill describe, this post-feminist culture of 'empowerment' functions by sidestepping its political roots and its political consequences, conflating modes of 'choice' and autonomy, regardless of whether a phenomenon's outcome is fundamentally feminist or misogynist.

Gill notes that the 'post-feminist trend' in which women are portrayed as liberated from gender inequalities, whereby their 'freedom' is expressed through participation in commodity culture, relies heavily on the tactic of self-objectification, particularly in advertising.<sup>98</sup> Gill explains that self-objectification becomes 'an indicator of power'<sup>99</sup> for women in advertisements, whereby their 'choice' to be viewed as sex objects is seen as an active expression of their subjecthood, rather than something imposed on women by men.<sup>100</sup> This mode of 'self-pleasure', whereby women are portrayed, as Gill writes, 'not as seeking men's approval, but as pleasing themselves' – like in the current trend of suburban women taking strip-tease or pole-dancing classes – presents women as '[celebrating] their own fetishization'.<sup>101</sup> But why is this mode of 'empowerment', as Levy questions, understood as the "new feminism", and not what it looks like: the old

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<sup>96</sup> Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, p. 75.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., pp. 86-7.

<sup>98</sup> Gill, *Gender and the Media*, p. 93.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

objectification?’<sup>102</sup> Gill similarly notes that these images of ‘self-pleasure’ are – as if by chance – also pleasing to heterosexual men.<sup>103</sup> Why, she wonders, ‘if we [women] are just pleasing ourselves, the resulting valued “look” is so similar – hairless body, slim waist, firm thighs’ to the images stereotypically intended to please heterosexual men. Furthermore, she questions how the acceptance of this substitute of self-objectification for empowerment blindly ignores the ways in which expressions of beauty, sexiness, or even empowerment, are socially constructed and then internalized.<sup>104</sup>

The trend of self-objectification, whereby women’s expression of their sexuality actually fulfills mainstream and misogynist ideas of female sexuality and is celebrated as female empowerment, is precisely what Levy refers to as ‘raunch feminism,’ and its participants as ‘Female Chauvinist Pigs.’ McRobbie describes this figure as ‘The Phallic Girl’.<sup>105</sup> This woman, by appropriating the phallus, seems to be on equal footing with men by being like them. McRobbie describes this phallic adoption as manifesting, most often, as ‘drinking to excess [...] swearing and being abusive [...] having casual sex, [and] often passing out on the street’, actions seemingly permitted under the ‘pretence of equality’ and celebrated as a manifestation of women’s newly-found agency.<sup>106</sup> While I in no way critique these behaviors outright, particularly because that critique could be misinterpreted as a moralizing of ‘feminine’ behavior, it is the justification of that behavior through its likeness to normative masculinity that render it problematic, particularly when that behavior is enacted in order to achieve approval, desirability, or validation from their hetero-male counterpart. As McRobbie explains, ‘the freedoms

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<sup>102</sup> Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, p. 81.

<sup>103</sup> Gill, *Gender and the Media*, p. 92.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>105</sup> McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, p. 83.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

associated with masculine sexual pleasures'<sup>107</sup> are promoted and glorified in this way as methods to access sexual equality, but are acquired without the surrendering of desirability; rather, this girl's sexual up-for-it-ness makes her even more attractive to her male counterparts.<sup>108</sup> And if such actions are not met with desire, they're met with misogynist remarks. As Levy explains, however close a woman comes to 'being like a man' in this way, she is still also 'like a woman,' and if womanhood is still seen as 'something to escape from, something less than manhood,' she asserts, 'you will be thought less of, too.'<sup>109</sup> This 'strategic endowment' of agency to young women through a kind of heterosexual masculine expression of self-objectifying sexuality inevitably reinstates, rather than challenges, gender stability, normativity, and female oppression. So while her agency is being celebrated in her independent behavior, she is also undoing feminism.

This kind of expression of empowerment fills our television and computer screens, magazines, billboards, and the surfaces of our public transportation. We are bombarded with images of women 'owning' and enjoying their objectification, and frequently, those images are coupled with an identification with feminism, or at least, 'female empowerment.' Pop stars like Beyoncé celebrate 'Girls Run[ning] the World', and Miley Cyrus and Katy Perry have both self-identified as 'big' feminists.<sup>110</sup> Hollows seems to celebrate this kind of 'celebrity feminism', arguing that to dismiss it is to fail to

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>109</sup> Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, p. 112.

<sup>110</sup> Tshepo Mokoena, 'Quiz: Which Pop Stars Made these Feminist Statements?', *Guardian Music Blog* [online], 25 September 2014

<<http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/quiz/2014/sep/25/quiz-pop-feminist-statements>>

[Accessed 7 August 2015].



recognize the discourse they are stimulating in mainstream culture.<sup>111</sup> I don't intend to dismiss 'celebrity feminism' or 'commodity feminism' outright – I can certainly see some benefits, such as collective consciousness-raising, identification with a larger social or political group, and the ways in which some of the debates around 'celebrity feminism' have entered public discourse, whereby non-academics are discussing questions central to feminist debate, based not on academic theory, but on current events in popular culture. However, the dangers in committing to this brand of feminism are manifold. The way in which sexual liberation is sold to women in different packaging – but with the same contents – as (stereo)typical male desire, as Gill describes, is troubling; the conflation of individual will with feminist empowerment, or agency, produces the troubling phenomenon of misogynist activity passing as feminist, as McRobbie suggests; and the trend-based and fickle quality of pop culture and mass media means their current deployment of a feminist lexicon could be dropped the minute it no longer 'sells'. More so, however, the kind of productivity-based consumer-citizen this brand of feminism encourages, produces a contemporary female subjectivity whose value is based on her 'success'. This success, fundamentally career-based, is measured by her contribution to strengthening the commodity-obsessed culture that requires her participation as a happy consumer. This subjectivity is steeped in a neoliberal cycle where she is both producer and consumer. Furthermore, she is also steeped in a paradigm of 'success', 'confidence' and 'empowerment' that has no way of incorporating negativity, difficulty, or doubt without falling into a framework of failure and victimization.

Pop-cultural appropriations of feminism, which embrace the 'choice-based' maxims of 'female empowerment', such as the typical 'survival' article in women's magazines as discussed in chapter four, have packaged and sold narratives of female survival, or empowerment, that are entirely dependent on the narrative of female

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<sup>111</sup> Joanne Hollows, *Feminism, Femininity, and Popular Culture*, p. 199.

victimhood, thus tying woman's potential accesses to agency to her inevitable status as victim.<sup>112</sup> But even through post-feminism's rejection of second-wave feminism based on its supposedly victimizing mentality, as expressed by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young here and in chapter one of this thesis, dominant culture's redeployment of those second-wave anti-porn tenets has resulted in a contemporary framework aligned with promoting a narrative of redemption for the female subject.<sup>113</sup> Within this framework, the displayed female body is either positioned as a triumph of individualism and choice that avoids any discourse around the potentially misogynist consequences of their display – or it renders her a victim of misogynist desires that delimit the parameters of her physical expression.

One of the most problematic issues arising from the post-feminist moment lies precisely within this dilemma: where does this subject's agency lie? On the one hand, according to these particular accounts of post-feminism, all choices made by a woman are considered empowering and therefore feminist.<sup>114</sup> 'Choice' becomes a claim to agency regardless of its participation in misogynist or patriarchal structures. On the other hand, the culture of redemption that renders the woman who displays her body a victim,

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<sup>112</sup> For example: 'Why I'm Glad I Reported my Rape', *Cosmopolitan*, 5 May 2015

≤<http://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/news/a41317/why-im-glad-i-reported-my-rape/>≥

[accessed 5 June 2015]; Jules Baueco 'The Night That's Haunted Me for 20 Years', *Cosmopolitan*,

27 May 2015 ≤[http://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/news/a41054/the-night-thats-haunted-me-](http://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/news/a41054/the-night-thats-haunted-me-for-20-years/)

[for-20-years/](http://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/news/a41054/the-night-thats-haunted-me-for-20-years/)≥ [accessed 5 June 2015]; Heather Wood Rudolph, '3 Survivors Reveal the Brutal

Reality of Female Genital Mutilation', *Cosmopolitan*, 25 April 2014

≤<http://www.cosmopolitan.com/lifestyle/advice/a6504/female-genital-mutilation-survivor-stories/>≥

[accessed 5 June 2015].

<sup>113</sup> Ferriss and Young, 'Chicks, Girls, and Choice: Redefining Feminism'.

<sup>114</sup> R. Claire Snyder-Hall, 'Third-wave feminism and the defense of "choice"', *Perspectives on Politics*, 8,1 (2010), 255-261.

strips her of any agency. Missing from both of these configurations is the idea that a woman's access to agency might also be access to a *critical* agency, and this is where this project intervenes.

Butler's theory of gender performativity lays a foundational groundwork for this project, particularly regarding subjectivity formation and the concept of agency. This theory provides an interpretation that acknowledges the impact on subject constitution of political, social, and economic bodies, but which doesn't negate the subject's active participation in constituting her/his subjectivity. As she writes,

Gender is not a radical choice or project that reflects a merely individual choice, but neither is it imposed or inscribed upon the individual, as some post-structuralist displacements of the subject would contend [...] But neither do embodied selves pre-exist the cultural conventions which essentially signify bodies [...] the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives.<sup>115</sup>

Butler's theory of performativity is not an essentialist framework, in which the subject might display an inherent will; the subject creates her/himself by performing her/himself. Butler's concept of gender performativity provides an alternative to the either/or of social determinism and individualism, which I find particularly useful in this thesis.

Butler's theory builds on Michel Foucault's writings on the subject and subjection. As Foucault claims:

I do indeed believe there is no sovereign, founding subject, a universal form of subject to be found everywhere [...] I believe, on the contrary, that the

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<sup>115</sup> Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', pp. 276-7.

subject is constituted through practices of subjection, or, in a more autonomous way, through practices of liberation, of liberty [...] on the basis, of course, of a number of rules, styles, inventions to be found in the cultural environment.<sup>116</sup>

Like Butler and Foucault, this thesis is grounded in the notion that the subject is not essentially or inherently 'sovereign', and that it is constructed, and constructs itself, through and by historical and cultural constraints, 'styles', and norms.

Significant to this deployment of performativity, however, is its political potential. As Lois McNay writes, 'the performative construction of gender identity [as conceived by Butler] *causes agency*' because, 'the identificatory processes, through which norms are materialized, permits the stabilization of a subject who is *capable of resisting those norms*'.<sup>117</sup> The concept of identity performativity, McNay explains, permits agency, because in the subject's enactment and construction of itself, while it can reify the norms through which it is determined, *it can also resist them*. This mode of resistance, of destabilization, is what Butler calls a 'resignification',<sup>118</sup> through which identities can be subverted and endowed with new meanings. And it is this 'resignification', the resistance to restabilizing norms, which constitutes this thesis' deployment of agency. As Butler writes,

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<sup>116</sup> Michel Foucault, 'An Aesthetics of Existence', in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, ed. by Lawrence D. Kritzman (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 47-53 (p. 50).

<sup>117</sup> Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (Cambridge, Oxford and Malden: Polity Press, 2000), p. 34-5. Emphasis added.

<sup>118</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 184.

Performativity describes this relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a 'pure' opposition, a 'transcendence' of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure.<sup>119</sup>

As I've previously mentioned, I am interested in the ways in which, through performance, alternative female subjectivities that resist dominant modes of power might be produced and enacted. The subjectivities enacted in my performance works are, as Butler suggests, 'implicated', and use 'impure resources', as they seemingly participate in the problematic constructions of female subjectivity outlined by post-feminism. However, as I discuss in depth in chapter four, these subjectivities actively resist post-feminist constructions of subjectivity by forcing them to participate in their own unmaking. It is a deliberate 'turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power', of agency. The displayed female body, assumed by post-feminism in most cases to automatically possess agency by the mere choice to display herself is critiqued in this thesis by its inability to distinguish between forms of display that participate in misogyny and those that resist it. The kind of agency I refer to throughout this thesis is a kind of *critical* agency that enacts a kind of critical, transformative, or political power. This is in direct contrast to the form of individualistic or voluntaristic will espoused by post-feminism, through which any and all choices made by a woman are understood as a form of agency, regardless of their lack of political or critical power through which structural and institutional misogyny is often upheld rather than critiqued.

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 184.

The performance works in this project are analysed by their *critical ability*, by their enacting of a kind of agency born out of political resistance to their exploitation – the form of agency I refer to throughout this project is a kind of *performative criticality*. Throughout this thesis, the use of the term ‘agency’ implies a critical agency engendered by the politics of performativity, through which norms are not reified, but resisted.

### **Post-feminism and The Culture of Affirmation**

The culture of happiness, or affirmation, described by Sara Ahmed in *The Promise of Happiness*, and Lauren Berlant’s delineation of ‘women’s culture’ in *The Female Complaint*, are two frameworks which work well to outline cultural frameworks that overlap with post-feminism, particularly in its espousal of ‘success’, ‘capacity’ and the overcoming of trauma as qualities that make up the ideal post-feminist subject.<sup>120</sup>

In *The Female Complaint*, Lauren Berlant explains the ways in which ‘women’s culture’ resists the political register, whereby agency is related more to the kind of emotional intelligence associated with the ‘confidence’ of ‘surviving’ and ‘thriving’.<sup>121</sup> She defines ‘women’s culture’, which I align with post-feminism through its similar reliance on affirmative vocabulary circulated through mass media and popular culture, as a ‘market domain’ that relies heavily on sentimentality and an assumed emotional commonality among women, through which the difficulties of femininity are collectively managed, expressed, and worked through.<sup>122</sup> Berlant outlines ‘women’s culture’ as the first ‘mass-marketed intimate public in the United States of significant scale’, flourishing

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<sup>120</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010); and Berlant, *The Female Complaint*.

<sup>121</sup> Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, p. 2.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

because of its ongoing prevalence among popular media from literature to film, and the widespread saturation of 'normative heterofemininity' across US (and, I add, UK) mainstream culture.<sup>123</sup> The intimate space of 'women's culture' provides, as she writes, '*relief from the political*' – a way in which the political is (phantasmatically) escaped through what is deemed 'personal', 'regardless,' as Berlant writes, 'of how what is personal has itself been threaded through mediated institutions and social hierarchy.'<sup>124</sup>

The 'women's culture' described by Berlant, and the culture of happiness outlined by Sara Ahmed in *The Promise of Happiness*, while regarding two different cultural phenomena, overlap significantly. Much of that overlap, I believe, occurs in the cultural and affective space of post-feminism. Like, post-feminism, 'women's culture' strongly focuses on affirmation-based or 'happiness' affects and vocabulary that claim to produce or activate agency in the female subject. As Ahmed explains, the imperative to 'be happy' underlies a vast array of cultural and commercial outputs. 'Happiness' is advertised and sold as a kind of desired finality, the achievement of which is associated with success, competence, completion. Happiness, it is said, is also a choice. We choose certain lifestyles, careers, opportunities, which lead us to this promise.<sup>125</sup> The individual choices made by the subject, and the power of her individualistic will, are rewarded by her success. This entanglement of happiness, success, and agency, create a particular aspirational model of subjectivity. This subject is 'complete', successful, has made 'choices', and has probably overcome hardship in order to achieve happiness.

The cultural insistence of 'happiness', Ahmed explains, is articulated through the insistent upholding of social norms because of its advertised proximity to certain states, institutions, and objects, like heterosexual marriage, wealth, or a particular set of

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 10. Emphasis in original.

<sup>125</sup> Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 10.

(mainstream, Christian) ethics.<sup>126</sup> Unhappiness is then associated with the failure to fulfill or follow these social ideals.<sup>127</sup> In a similar vein, Berlant writes that 'women's culture' is a product of capitalist commodity culture marketing 'conventionality' as the 'solution' to their problems.<sup>128</sup> Socio-normativity, for both Ahmed and Berlant, is sold as the source of happiness. But, as Ahmed points out, happiness is both a way of concealing 'what resists or is resistant to a view of the world [...] as harmonious' as well as a set of politics that demand a particular way of living.<sup>129</sup> That which resists, refuses, or fails those social ideas that insist on the conformity of 'happiness' is, however, that which is most often oppressed by it. She explains that the work of feminist, anti-racist and queer scholars have worked to show the ways in which 'happiness is used to justify oppression', through critiquing the figure of 'the happy housewife', 'the happy slave', or the celebration of heterosexual monogamy as 'domestic bliss'. These critiques, she explain, 'expose the unhappy effects of happiness', whereby happiness is deployed to reinstate social norms under the guise of social good and happiness.<sup>130</sup>

Like in the world of 'commodity feminism', there is a danger in believing this 'happiness' is actually what it says on the tin. The choices available to express that 'happiness', like 'individualism', are pre-packaged and limited, through which commodity capitalism is able to sell 'affirmation', 'empowerment', or 'choice' as something to be consumed. Within this model of 'happiness' and 'individuality', what's actually being sold is a kind of conventional, heteronormative femininity, that, rather than producing any kind of originality or singularity, produces the comfort of conformity

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., pp. 6, 7, 15.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>128</sup> Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, p. 31.

<sup>129</sup> Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, pp. 83-4.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 2.



with a more enticing logo, thereby oppressing or marginalizing those that refuse, resist, or fail to meet its demand.

## Negativity

The mode of political resistance with which this project engages is primarily the notion of negativity. This project employs strategies and subjectivities that resist pop/commodity culture's distribution of affirmation, and the celebration of the coherent, successful, capable subject. My definition of 'negativity' here is in line with that of Ahmed and Bailes who each understand failure or negativity as modes that resist the normativizing power of 'happiness' and 'success'.<sup>131</sup> In the chapters that follow, I will propose a reading of the feminist subject that does not rely on affirmative or positive affects, such as self-esteem, pleasure, choice, or freedom – affects that have generally been celebrated and normalized by post-feminism. By disengaging with these affects or concepts understood by dominant culture as 'feminist', and re-focusing on negativity, mess, and failure, I propose alternative modes of embodiment, display, and agency for the contemporary feminist subject.

Like Ngai's deployment of negativity in *Ugly Feelings* (2007), this project aims to 'recuperate [...] negative affects for their *critical* productivity.'<sup>132</sup> Ngai suggests that *minor* negative affects, such as envy, irritation, or paranoia, are used as an expression of

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<sup>131</sup> Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*; pp. 65-6; Sara Jane Bailes, *Performance Theatre and The Poetics of Failure: Forced Entertainment, Goat Island, Elevator Repair Service* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 2.

<sup>132</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 3. Emphasis in original.

thwarted agency, mirroring contemporary art's feelings towards its own (in)capacity for political action.<sup>133</sup> Ngai defines these affects as:

‘semantically’ negative, in the sense that they are saturated with socially stigmatizing meanings and values [...] and as ‘syntactically’ negative, in the sense that they are organized by trajectories of repulsion rather than attraction, by phobic strivings ‘away from’ rather than philic strivings ‘toward.’<sup>134</sup>

For Ngai, the non-cathartic aspect of these affects signal an ‘obstructed agency’.<sup>135</sup>

However, I will interpret the works of contemporary artists as employing negativity, not to express a hindered agency, but to embody an alternative form of agency for feminist subjectivities. This project aims to find a feminist agency that derives from the liminal body, the messy body, and its tendencies towards humiliation, awkwardness, difficulty, failure, and ambiguity.

More significant to this project though, is Ngai’s definition of these affects as ‘explicitly amoral and acathartic, offering no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release.’<sup>136</sup> The particular strategies I employ, particularly ‘ineptitude’, failure, and ‘incompleteness’ – or ‘blue-balling’ as I define it in chapter four – are strategies that work particularly to prevent catharsis and the satisfying completion of both expected narratives and subjectivities. For Bailes, performances of failure may resist dominant culture’s celebration of ‘success.’ She writes,

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p. 6. Emphasis in original.

The discourse of failure as reflected in western art and literature seems to counter the very ideas of progress and victory that simultaneously dominate historical narratives. It undermines the perceived stability of mainstream capitalist ideology's preferred aspiration to achieve, succeed, or win, and the accumulation of material wealth as proof and effect arranged by those aims.<sup>137</sup>

I extend Bailes' argument towards a critique of post-feminism's championing of 'empowerment' based on individualist assumptions about identity. Therefore, I deploy ineptitude to resist success; incompleteness to resist redemption; mess to resist empowerment and affirmation; and fragmentation and multiplicity to resist singularity and essentialism. These strategies of resistance are negative because they undermine dominant culture's insistence that we, as female subjects, are successful, empowered, affirmative survivors (of trauma).

Ahmed suggests that feminism is 'saturated with unhappiness'. Feminists, she states, are perceived as 'destroying' what others understand to be the cause of happiness, by disturbing fantasies of happiness and its associations with conformity and normativity.<sup>138</sup> 'The feminist killjoy,' she writes, "'spoils" the happiness of others; she is a spoilsport because she refuses to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness' because she reveals the 'bad feelings that get hidden, displaced, or negated under public signs of joy.'<sup>139</sup> The killjoy, though, she argues, is a necessary position. Feminism is a history of troublemakers,<sup>140</sup> she writes, 'functioning as an unwanted reminder of histories

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<sup>137</sup> Bailes, *Performance Theatre and The Poetics of Failure*, p. 2.

<sup>138</sup> Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, pp. 65-6.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

that are disturbing, that disturb an atmosphere.<sup>141</sup> Like Ahmed, this project is interested in negativity as ‘creative responses to histories’, narratives and cultural frameworks that require disturbing.<sup>142</sup> As she writes, ‘there can even be joy in killing joy. And kill joy, we must and we do.’<sup>143</sup> Like Ahmed, this project embraces the killjoy, the negative and resistant punch, which disturbs prescribed and constraining modes of being.

### **The Structure of the Thesis**

Included in this thesis are two DVDs, each including documentation of the two major practical elements. The first DVD contains the performance of *How to Become a Cupcake/The Famous’ Adaptation of Frankenstein* at the Arnolfini in Bristol as part of In Between Time festival in 2013. The second DVD contains both a trailer and full documentation of *Splat!* in its presentation at The Barbican in SPILL Festival of Performance, 2013. I include the trailer of this show in the DVD as the full performance is 90 minutes long. The trailer serves to provide the reader with a brief ‘summary’ of the content and feeling of the full performance, in addition to its full presentation; the reader is invited to watch the full document, but may choose to watch the trailer instead. I indicate throughout the thesis at which points watching each show would be most appropriate.

In the written thesis, I begin with a textual description of *Splat!* The description of the show appears at the beginning of the thesis in order to lay a practical groundwork for the thesis as a whole, and in order to color the reader’s interpretation of the following chapters. I analyze *Splat!* in the last chapter because I see it as the culmination of the

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p. 217.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

theoretical and contextual work of the previous chapters, but I would like *Splat!* to remain in the reader's mind throughout, acting as a cognitive, and affective, point of return.

With *Splat!* on its heels, chapter one contextualizes my practice within a lineage of feminist performance from the 1960s to the present. This chapter begins with an analysis of pieces by Carolee Schneemann and Hannah Wilke, whose work, strategically and politically, precedes my own. Their work adamantly addresses the problem of agency for the displayed female body, and continuously challenging assumed dualities between male/female, subject/object, active/passive. Their work lays the foundation for my practice, along with other contemporary artists, in challenging problematic female subjectivities. I continue by briefly examining the performances of three current practitioners to situate my work within a contemporary context. Ann Liv Young's *Sherry Tries on Cinderella* (2010), GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN's *Big Hits!* (2012), and Nao Bustamante's *America the Beautiful* (2002) are examples of contemporary work that I situate alongside my own within the post-feminist framework. These artists also work with strategies of negativity, from ineptitude, to mess, to aggression, in order to problematize post-feminist subjectivities. These performances, in line with my own, force post-feminism to participate in its own critique, activating a mode of resistant and critical agency, which I explore in relation to my own practice in chapter four.

Chapter two aims to identify how the logic of victimization that demonizes physical display as misogynist and strips the displayed female subject of its agency, stemming from mainstream culture's appropriation of the anti-porn strand of second-wave feminism, is an unproductive and anachronistic method of criticality that is still in play. Through an analysis of texts by Andrea Dworkin, one of the most prominent voices of the anti-porn faction, I begin by identifying the narrative of victimization that underpins anti-porn feminist convictions, and explain how the backlash against

feminism, which has resulted in the post-feminist trend, stems precisely from their most problematic tenets. I will then examine the controversy around Marina Abramović's artistic direction of the Los Angeles' Museum of Contemporary Art's annual gala in 2011 and the Toxic Titties' infiltration of Vanessa Beecroft's piece *VB46* at the Gagosian Gallery in Los Angeles in 2002, which reveals the continued problematic assumption that the displayed female body inherently espouses exploitation and victimization.

Taking the figure of the whore associated with the displayed female body, the second chapter attempts to reclaim that figure. The 'culture of redemption' that functions as part of mainstream culture in conjunction with post-feminism, works to redeem a kind of 'lost' purity of the figure of the whore. Rather than recuperate that figure as a latent victim though, this chapter reclaims the 'whore' as political, whose dialectical position as both agent and object provides her with a critical stance that actually resists the role of victim. In this chapter, I will examine the cultural tendency to redeem the figure of 'the whore' as a victim through the work of artist Lynn Hershman, whose practice spans disciplines and decades from the 1960s to the present. Her work does not necessarily deal with the displayed female body, but with female subjectivity more broadly. To use the term 'whore' in the context of her work might, at first, seem a bit of a stretch, but this chapter deploys the term as a way of negotiating the dialectical image the figure of the whore presents, as defined through Walter Benjamin and Rebecca Schneider.

Hershman's work, however, has often been associated with the role of the victim. Her work has often been celebrated for its ability to open a place of 'liberation' or 'autonomy' at the site of victimization. Rather than see her work as overcoming a kind of victimization, I position her work as deliberately resisting a pathologizing reading through what I term her 'identity-promiscuity.'

The political potential in Hershman's work, I argue, lies not in her ability to 'redeem' herself from victimization through her art, but in the constant re-framing of the

question of her subjectivity, and female subjectivity more broadly, as multiple. This potential, I argue, is also what is threatening about her work. Hershman's multiplicity, her noncommittal and unreliable portrayal of her 'self' – her 'identity-promiscuity' – enables its critical ability. I frame this argument via Leo Bersani's delineation of the 'culture of redemption', in which he describes the cultural tendency to read art as redemptive of life, whereby it acts to repair its flaws and recuperate some untarnished version of reality.

Chapter four focuses on my own strategies in performance, which like Hershman, Schneemann and Wilke, challenge and resist misogynist, and redemptive, accounts of the female body. In my own work, however, the cultural framework of post-feminism starkly impacts the modes through which misogynist delineations of female subjectivity are resisted. The first part of this chapter outlines a particular strategy of 'negativity' – namely, what I call 'strategic ineptitude' – in my performance *How to Become a Cupcake/The Famous' Adaptation of Frankenstein* to stage the multiplicity of female subjectivity. Strategic ineptitude, I argue, actively blurs the lines between 'the show' and 'not-the-show'. The affective repercussions of the shuttling back and forth between fulfilling the show and failing to do so, I argue, point to the pleasures and disappointments in the failure of a representation to be what it names. I will focus on the inevitable 'miss' between theatrical representation and external reality, and the political potency inherent in that 'miss', particularly in relation to constructions of female subjectivity. I argue that the space between fulfillment and failure, between the 'coherent' subject and her 'ineptitude' to fulfill that coherency, is precisely where her agency may lie. The second part of this chapter expands on part one, and brings together the arguments of the previous chapters. I analyze *Splat!* in order to situate the 'inept' and multiple subjectivity discussed earlier in the chapter within a political framework. Strategies of negativity, like strategic ineptitude and 'blue-balling' or 'incompleting', I argue, work to undermine and resist post-feminist culture and its redemptive tendencies. I focus particularly on the way

in which *Splat!* redeploys post-feminist structures of trauma and survival. The mainstream pop-feminist model of the empowered woman is predicated on the assumption of her previous experience of trauma and the subsequent activation of 'survival' affects to enable the subject's 'overcoming' of trauma. This model of empowered or 'coherent' subjectivity, I argue, is one that rejects the possibility of mess, failure, humiliation, or other forms of negativity and failure. Within this 'successful' model of subjectivity, these messy possibilities would return the subject to (her 'previous') victimhood. This chapter, however, asks whether the enactment of negativity in *Splat!* might not only act as a subversive resistance to the strip mall of female affirmation, but might also provide an alternative method of agency production that is not dependent upon the possibly impossible paradigm of the integrated subject. This chapter, and the project as a whole, aims is to look away from post-feminism's commodification and sale of 'self-esteem' and 'choice'-based politics, and towards the space in which a female body can break, fail, repair, succeed, and break again, and still exert its agency.





Figure 5: The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein, Splat!, The Barbican, 2013, image by Jon Cartwright

## Interlude

### *Splat!*: A Performance in Text



Please watch the DVD of *Splat!* now.

In *Splat!*, as in many of my performances to date, I inhabit the role of ‘The Famous’, my recklessly imperious, questionably feminist, adorably detestable, popstar persona. In *Splat!*, The Famous, along with her cast of faltering female clichés, tries on a number of traumatic female identities, each of which are in some way discarded – abandoned, rejected, forgotten about. But with each new attempt, the scene becomes more spectacular than the last, each identity-adoption an attempt to trump the previous, reaching towards, but never achieving, the impossible goal of ultimate female victimhood. From disgruntled housewife, to hypersexual whore/witch/popstar, to domesticated animal – through infantilized innocence, (hyper-) horniness and the open wounds of suffering – these various roles of traumatic female-ness are carefully chosen, but (seemingly) haphazardly tried on and thrown off again, like cheap and ill-fitting clothes in the dressing rooms of Primark.

In The Barbican’s Silk Street Theatre (London) on 3-4 April 2013, *Splat!* launched the biennial SPILL Festival of Performance. With a core cast of six performers, one on-stage live-feed videographer, one on-stage photographer, twenty-five backup dancers,

and some challenging technical aspects, *Splat!* is a titanic production – both because huge and catastrophic, in the most purposeful way possible.

*Splat!* begins with a prologue of sorts: a watermelon wearing a long blonde wig is suspended 20 feet in the air in a single spotlight amidst a vast black stage. Seconds tick by in silence. Like many scenes in the show, the waiting lasts just a little too long. Then... SPLAT! It falls and explodes on the stage floor: a death-mess of pink juicy flesh and artificial yellow hair. Blackout.

As the lights return, I appear, as The Famous, wearing the same blonde wig as the watermelon, and a white apron, standing over the splatted fruit, with an unbroken melon in my arms, like a baby. Behind me stands an eight-foot red and white bulls-eye target, and on the PA sounds the familiar histrionics of a Leona Lewis pop ballad, *Trouble* (2012). Like the first melon, I, too, am suspended by the fly system, from a harness attached to my pelvis. I begin to swing towards and away from the audience, my toes flirting with the floor, and, with a troubling sincerity, I begin to belt out the cloying lyrics over the song's recording: *I'm a whole lotta trouble... oh oh oooh...*

The other performers slowly enter during this scene. Two wind-up princesses enter, one pink, one blue. The pink (Krista Vuori) heads upstage right to a blanket laid out on the floor; the blue (Hrafnhildur Benediktsdóttir, or Hraf) is my counterweight on the fly system, and the audience is able to view her climbing up and down a vertical ladder in the open wings, stage right. Two women in blonde wigs, jeans, and flannel shirts – 'the twins' (Rebecca Duschl and Else Tunemyr) – enter and sit down at a small table, facing each other. They begin to mirror each other, applying full-face green makeup to themselves. One (naturally) blonde woman in a white thong bikini (Lucy McCormick, or Lulu, of GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN) enters and impassively flops to the floor, sitting with her back to the twins' table, her legs sprawled carelessly. A videographer (Katerina Paramana) and a photographer (Jon Cartwright) appear, both of whom document The

Famous' actions like paparazzi, cameras in my face, then at a distance, with the video live-feeding onto a projection screen at the back of the stage throughout the show.

After a few minutes, I motion to the sound technician to cut the song short, and in the silence, remove myself from the fly harness. I instruct Krista, the pink princess, to 'take care of my melon', which she brings back to her blanket area and cuddles. 'And put this one back together', I insist, without irony, pointing to the obviously irrecoverable smashed fruit at my feet.

And with this impossible request to repair the unrepairable, we begin Act One.

I walk downstage right to a large table lined with rows of tomatoes, knives, and a chopping board, with an enormous witch's cauldron placed on its left. After sharpening my selection of knives, I chop, toss, and plop each tomato in the cauldron, where it lands with a splat. 'This is how you like it, huh?' I whisper to the sweet little tomato, 'you want more?' And after a few minutes, 'hold your breath, it gets better,' I murmur – although whether this is said to the tomato or for the audience's benefit, who've now seen 30 tomatoes go down in succession, is unclear.

'Hey Lulu, can you practice my death scene?' I call to my thonged friend, still chopping. Lulu gets up from her lazily sprawled position on the floor, upstage left, and comes to the microphone stand downstage. '*Ahem, cough cough,*' she begins by clearing her throat. She continues, '*acckk cough cough uuuhhhnn cough acckkk!*' as she slowly coughs, chokes, or sexes to death on the floor.

'Do it sexier.'

Lulu gets up and tries again. '*Ooohh ahhh, mmmm, cough cough, blech, ooooh yesss.... Accckkk... uuuhh mmm!*' she screams, falling to the floor with an arch, hump, and writhe.

‘OK, that was good. But this time, do it like you’re Rihanna, and like Chris Brown is strangling you, and fucking you in the mouth, and like, it’s killing you, but, like, you like it.’

Lulu looks at me astray. ‘OK... *cough, mmm blech,*’ wriggle wriggle, hands to throat, ‘*acckkk coughhhh blechhh mmmm uuuh uhuh uhuh*’, hands and knees on the floor, ‘*aaaahhh!! Uuuh uh blechhh aahhh!!*’ Moan, yelp, collapse.

‘Ok. Just do it like you’re in the zoo.’

A beat. Then, ‘*Baaaahhh! Aacckkk uhuh uhuh ROOAARR!!! Uh uh uh mmmm neiighhh! mmm... eh eh eh RuFf RuFF!!*’ And it goes on. And on. And on.

I motion to Krista, who approaches me, melon cradled in her arms, and shows me her back. I pull a makeshift windup cord from her princess dress, and as it slaps against her back, she walks towards the mike stand. She stands with her mouth an inch from the microphone head, about to speak. What will come out of this wind-up doll’s mouth? What does she have to say? Something about shopping or her pretty dress? Something about how she loves cooking or how math is hard? We wait.

She pukes.

She pukes baby food all over the floor by Lulu’s feet at the edge of the mike stand, and returns to her blanket upstage.

‘Thanks, Krista...’

Then, bored by the chopping, I climb onto the table, spread my legs, place a tomato right in front of my crotch, and slice it, slowly, right down the middle, a vulval slit, a vaginal crevice, a hymen split, yum yum. I then ram the juicy, devirginized fruit into my mouth, and propel it into the cauldron with a spit. I stand up on the table, catapult the knife with a yelp at the target (barely making it inside the frame, although aiming at the red circle in the center), and demand to be taken center-stage ‘with my center-stage music’. I toss my apron in a crumpled heap to the floor, along with this first

personality. I'm moving on. A red 80s-style, up-the-butt bathing suit is revealed from under the apron.

The performers gather around the table to carry me, and the table, while *Get Ready for This*, an early 90s dance jam that reminds me of basketball games, begins blasting on the PA. I insert another, much longer knife, into my vagina, handle-first. To the beat, I smack a tomato-filled balloon against the knife-edge. And repeat, and repeat, and repeat. To the beat, to the beat, to the beat. *Get ready for this da na na...* 50 balloons later, 'We've run out of balloons... what's next?' I get the sound technician's attention again and cut the song short.

As I clean myself up, I call Krista-the-puking-princess over. I pull her string. She makes her way downstage. She presses her lips to the microphone. We wait. We know what's coming. She pukes. Lovely.

'Take me to the fairytale,' I demand, and Hraf, my blue princess, the assigned weightlifter of the show, carries me in my arabesque position over a slippery and slimy floor, to the edge of the stage.

After some bitchy remarks to my cast to 'hurry up', it's story time. On a little blanket at the very front of the stage, with intimate lighting, I read a fairytale to the audience. 'The Tale of Little Bitch', it's called. I open the oversized prop book, whilst the twins, now in full-blown witch makeup, sit on my either side, braid my hair, and stare creepily at selected audience members for extended periods of time.

Once upon a time

In a land far, far away

Lived a beautiful Little Bitch.

She was the daughter of a brave huntsman

Who spent each day risking his life

In the dark and dangerous woods  
Protecting the fearful villagers and his sweet little daughter  
From the savage beasts who prowled within.

Little Bitch's mother had exploded in childbirth,  
So she grew up in the gentle hands of her father.  
As she grew into womanhood,  
She spent each day cooking and cleaning,  
Shaking and baking,  
Chopping and pop-locking,  
Trapped by her chores in their homely little cottage.

Every night Little Bitch would await her father's return.  
As soon as he came home, dripping and panting,  
She was required to strip him of his torn clothing,  
Bathe his naked body, and tend to his bloody, dripping wounds –  
The deep scratches on his arms and chest,  
The teeth marks on his thighs and penis.  
But little Bitch knew not to ask questions.  
Her father was just doing his job, and as long as he came home each night,  
Everything was going to be all right.

In the mornings, once her father kissed her goodbye,  
Little Bitch had to return to her daily chores.  
But although her arduous tasks certainly kept her busy,  
She found her mind wandering and wondering,

Dreaming of a world beyond the cottage, beyond the village,  
A world where things happened, where life could be lived.

One day, her father came home to find Little Bitch singing to herself outside.  
There was no supper on the table.  
He soon discovered that Little Bitch had not completed a single chore all day.

He quickly brought her inside, bathed her, tucked her in bed, and prayed. His Little Bitch must be ill.

But Little Bitch gently protested –

She had only been daydreaming and had lost track of time,  
That indeed she felt fine, more than fine, and would happily make him his supper.  
Her father finally submitted and went to the back shed to butcher the meat from his day's hunt for Little Bitch to chop up and add to her stew.

It was a tasty catch that evening, very tender and juicy.

But as Little Bitch brought the fork to her mouth,

She bit into quite a chewy chunk.

After demurely spitting out the questionable morsel into her napkin,

She discovered that the chunk of meat was an odd shape.

It did not appear to be the same tender, juicy flesh as the rest of the stew –

It lacked the long striations that weave themselves along a lean cut of meat.

Rather, this chunk had flaps and folds, larger on the outside, and increasingly smaller toward the center of the chunk. It had shallow clefts and one deep cavity in its center, its color progressing from peachy-pink to deep red from the outside in.



Little Bitch examined this morsel with intense curiosity –

It looked very familiar, and yet, she could not place it.

After a moment, however, Little Bitch shrugged her shoulders, smiled at her loving father, and continued to enjoy their meal.

The next morning, after her father kissed her goodbye,

Little Bitch went about her daily chores as usual.

She finished early, went out into the fields, and allowed herself to daydream again.

Her mind wandered and wondered, as she dreamed again of  
a world where things happened, where life could be lived.

But before she knew it, she realized she had wandered into the forest!

Intending to turn directly around and march right back home,

She began to hear a soft melody in the distance.

Drawn towards the mysterious song, Little Bitch caught a flash of a barefoot woman running among the trees.

She followed the woman with wonder and fear, until she came upon a most shocking sight.

A group of unmarried women, with their hair down, dancing in a circle, jumping, walking on their tiptoes, laughing, singing, shouting, touching each other.

These didn't look like the women in the village – they weren't cooking or cleaning, shaking or baking.

Did they not have a house to clean, a loving husband, precious children to feed?

Little Bitch had never seen women behaving this way!

Shocked and terrified, Little Bitch shrieked and ran, panting and crying in utter terror all the way home.

When her father returned that evening,  
Little Bitch feigned ill and immediately went to bed.

The shock and terror had eventually worn off, but Little Bitch's curiosity had got the better of her –

She needed to know what went on in the woods.

She didn't really go to sleep when she bade her father goodnight.

She was devising a plan.

Around this point, Else, a witch-twin, goes to the microphone. She interrupts the storytelling to announce, dispassionately, 'we're now going to pass the microphone around the audience. We'd like to get some thoughts and feedback on how you're feeling. Emotionally. Right now. At this moment.' Silence.

Krista looks like she has something to say. She takes hold of the microphone from Else's hand. Maybe this time, she'll actually speak. But probably not. Nope. She's puked again.

'OK great, thanks Krista. Shall we continue?'

After seeing her father off the next day,  
Little Bitch immediately removed her apron and her bonnet,  
Let her hair flow freely down her back,  
Removed her knickers,  
And did not shave her pubic hair.  
Little Bitch was now in disguise and ready to venture into the woods.

Once she spotted the women again,  
Little Bitch dove behind the nearest tree and watched them sinfully frolic and chant  
along, their hair blowing pervertedly in the wind.  
But all of a sudden, her father appeared,  
Charging towards the women on his steed.  
He penetrated their circle, and began threatening them with his long heroic sword.  
But the women did not appear afraid.

They pounced on him, ripped his clothes off, their own clothes off, Each other's  
clothes off, tearing and shrieking and clawing, until their naked circle of frenzy  
surrounded him.

Their razor-edged nails clawed at his body, their fanged teeth tore at his flesh,  
They tore, bit, gnawed, ripped, shredded, and clawed.  
His penis became the focus of their violence,  
As they enclosed it in their mouths, grabbed it with their teeth, and pulled back  
hard, releasing it like a slingshot, so his entire body was flung backwards, only to  
be caught again in the claws of another depraved witch.  
His penis was gnawed on like a dog's bone,  
Chewed and pawed until it was red and throbbing, dripping with flesh and blood,  
but all the time getting bigger and bigger, stiffer and stiffer.  
Her father was shrieking and yelling, barking and hollering.  
Little Bitch could only imagine the horrible pain he must be in!

(Around here, the audience begins to notice something falling from the ceiling, across the width of the stage, like clumpy yellow snowflakes... or something...)

And slowly, slowly,

The women's vaginas opened as wide as a bear's mouth,

Opened wider and wider, as wide as a dragon's asshole,

And suddenly, quickly, violently, out of each vagina, was birthed a monstrous creature.

The women's inner savages, their inner beasts, were born –

Wild animals, each with 27 eyes, seven sets of teeth, 46 claws, and 19 vaginal cavities, each lined with another row of fangs.

The women's newly born beasts pounced upon Little Bitch's father,

Clawing, gnawing, fucking, beating, fucking, throwing, biting, Flinging, thrashing and fucking until Little Bitch's father yelled so loud it shook the trees of the forest, and thrusting so hard it moved the clouds.

Suddenly, a wild stream came bursting forth from her father's rigid and gnarled penis,

A thick white forceful stream, exploded, erupted, cracked, banged, boom,

And blew all the witches to the floor.

As Little Bitch spied, her body shivered and shuddered, trembled and tingled, with each stab and scream.

Something about it excited her, something she could feel but could not explain.

She got so excited that she, unknowingly, walked closer and closer to the scene of the battle, forgetting to stay hidden in the trees.

All of a sudden, she pounced on her father,

Tore her own cloak open

And came at him vagina-first.

She began tearing at him with her teeth, her nails,

Began shrieking, squealing, screaming, fighting, biting, screeching, Fucking fucking fucking fucking,

Until her father finally wrangled her to the ground,

Held her by the throat,

And sliced her body up and down with his sword,

Ready to take her home to be chopped up into their stew,

While she thrashed and squealed in delight.

The witches, believing one of their own to be at the hands of the huntsman,

Came quickly to Bitch's rescue,

Flung her father to the treetops,

And carried Little Bitch back to their cave.

Still in the heat of frenzy, Little Bitch laid back,

While the vaginal beasts fucked and destroyed her,

Ripping her flesh apart,

Tearing chunks of flesh off with their fangs,

Fucking those wounds with their monstrous dicks, gouging out her bloody wounds with their vagina-dicks,

Fucking and fucking until Little Bitch released her own vaginal monster and immediately collapsed in delight.

The next morning, Little Bitch awoke,  
And after recollecting the night before,  
Remembered where she was.  
Terrified at first, she then grew uncertain—  
What had she become?  
What had happened to her father?  
Should she remain here in the cave,  
Living with her fellow witch-bitches?  
Was this the adventure she'd been waiting for?

'THE END,' I shout, slamming the book shut. The lights shift as I stand front and center with a pair of scissors in my hand. Snip, snip, snip. There go my beautiful blonde braids, thrown to the floor. The audience now sees that the yellow snowflakes are actually clumps of hair, drifting down from above, covering the stage. I grab my head, tear off the rest of my wig, and order, 'put that back together', as I cast it to the floor like the housewife's apron... and the housewife.

'We are now going to take a short pause as we get ready for Act Two,' announces Else, and the lights go to black.

But rather than the house lights coming up, a dim blue light comes up on stage, and the sounds of a recorded piano. Tori Amos' beautiful/heartfelt/heartwrenching/soppy/annoying song *China* (1991) begins to play, and with a loose gray shirt thrown over my bathing suit and pointe shoes on my feet, I begin to dance. In contrast to everything seen so far, this section seems to celebrate the body as capable,

pristine, purposeful, and beautiful. It doesn't fit. It is irkingly pretty and genuine. It sits up against the show like a dark reminder of what one might have really wanted to see on The Barbican stage. But then, this isn't really part of the show. This is 'a brief pause', an intermission, an interjection.

Five minutes later, after turns and high legs and intricate arm movements, I exit, the lights sharply blast back to bright, and Krista, with baby-melon in her arms, slowly crosses the stage, comically passes the microphone, and exits. A moment later, a watermelon comes crashing onto the stage from where we've both exited, splintering into juicy pink and green pieces all over the stage. And I scream, 'ACT TWO!'

Cue the flashing colored lights and the booming beats of Nicole Scherzinger's hit pop-hump-dance song, *Poison* (2011). I re-enter, naked but for the fly harness hanging awkwardly from my pelvis. I dance, hump, and twerk, eating and spitting out the bits of broken melon all over the stage, before I hook myself up to the fly system. Hraf is back on the ladder, throwing me up and down, 20 feet up and back down to the ground, as she counters my weight. Hump, hump, bump, dance, twerk it, shake it, crump, crump, my body is all over the place, boobs flopping, legs flailing, arms pumping, flying all around. I do the splits and some flips, but mostly I thrash, over and over again. I get so exhausted that I have to scream to get my body to keep moving. The song ends, but I demand a repeat of the song – it can't end yet.

Eventually I come down and ask Lulu to sing the song for a bit. She takes the camera from the videographer and holds it up to her face, turning the projection screen into a YouTube selfie video of a sexy party slut... *I've got that poison uh huh, I've got that poison, uh huh, I've got that poison on my miiinnddd...*

I return front and center, sitting with my legs open like I'm in a gynecologist's chair. I writhe and wriggle my pelvis, push and wiggle, until, just one minute later, I give birth. A beautiful little baby McDonald's Happy Meal toy. Bambi. A miracle.

Rather than birthing my inner, monstrously savage beast, I've given birth to an innocent little shooshoo. (With grandparents as innocuous as Disney and McDonald's, what would you expect?) I leave the adorable little thing shimmering in the spotlight for a few minutes as I disappear behind the target. The humpy dance monster is gone. The rest of the cast begins to clean the stage with an impassive complacency. Nothing much is happening while Nicole Scherzinger's voice continues to rattle out her horny lyrics. Again.

Then, on the last note: BAM! A slutty Bambi comes bursting through the target! It's me, changed into a white (i.e. more virginal) 80s-style, also-up-the-butt bathing suit, roller skates, and a massive Bambi mascot-like head. I have become my inner adorable beast.

Out of breath, huffing and puffing in the newly formed silence, I begin to sing. My singing voice, naturally like that of a six-year-old with a lisp, is squeaky and panting, as the words to Disney's *A Whole New World* from *Aladdin* (1992) screech into the theater. *I can show you the world, shining shimmering, splendid...*, as my two princesses grab my hands and push me around the stage, choreographing my tripping and tumbling into awkward spins and erratic gestures.

On the last line of the song, I am given a push to skate across the stage, my arms outstretched towards the audience... *For youuuu aaand meeeeeeeeeee... peeeeeeeeeee...* As I end up on all fours, my leg lifted like a dog on the microphone stand... *Eeeeeeeeeee...* And I pee. I then begin to mark my territory on stage. I pee on the target; I pee on Else. My bladder empties, so Hraf brings me a basket of test tubes filled with tomato substance. I insert these one at a time into my vagina, and release my 'period' on the mike stand, on the cauldron, and then on Lucy's face, who climbs between my legs to catch my juice. I then spread my legs and do a split on top of her, stick my tongue in her mouth, and we make out, spitting out tomato sauce between licks. It is an unsexy lesbian fantasy, spoilt



by faces smeared by period tomato-blood, incessant spitting, and our disgusted groans at the taste of this tomato concoction.

‘We’re now going to pass the microphone around the audience for some feedback on how you’re feeling...’

We are interrupted. But I don’t want to do this bit – ‘I really don’t care what they think.’ Instead, ‘Lulu, go sing and entertain them for a bit while we get ready for the next section.’

The curtain slowly comes down, as Lucy brings the mike stand in front of it, and I, waving goodbye to the audience from behind, disappear. The familiar piano sounds again. It’s Tori Amos’ *China*. This time, just the backing track, so Lucy can show off her virtuosic vocal skills. It is heartwrenching, and beautiful, and awkward, because it doesn’t fit. But it’s lovely. Like the dance, it’s what one might expect on this kind of stage, but under entirely different circumstances.

After five minutes, ‘OK, shut up. We’re ready for Act Three!’, and the curtain rises to see slutty Bambi lying seductively on the floor, in a bloodbath. The witch-twins gently pour the contents of the cauldron over my body.

‘Lulu, call on my woodland friends,’ and *aahehaahehaaahh*, she Disney-princess-sings, summoning four variously naked people wearing fox, badger, and raccoon masks, seemingly out of nowhere, onto the stage to carry the cauldron out of the way.

‘Noah, put the next song on,’ I call out to the technician, and the cheesy sounds of a keyboard begins to play. *A Whole New World* (the R&B remix) plays, and I sing along, as I am slowly dragged by my feet, attached to a rope, across the floor. I start to rise off the ground, and gradually, through the song, I end up hanging by my ankles 15 feet in the air. The Bambi head comes off in the bloodbath, and is taken to hang on a butcher hook upstage, while a mounting frame, the kind used for hunted animal heads, is

placed around my face. The song comes to an end. *Cough cough. Blech. Cough. Aackk cough cough cough.* Silence.

I'm dead. Sort of. I'm dead, hanging, swaying upside down for a couple of minutes, a stupid, theatrical, fake death, before one eye opens to peak at the audience. They're still there.

'I'm hungry. Get me a burger.'

And like that, we've moved on again. I remove the awkward frame from my head and begin munching on the McDonald's quarter-pounder Else has just handed me, dipping it in the ketchup that covers my body, sighing with delight and panting with exhaustion.

'Thanks,' I say, 'and thanks for being late to like every rehearsal. It saved me like £40, and I only had to pay you like £800.

'And thanks to Hraf for having bigger tits than me. She cost £3,275.

'And thanks to Becca for doing like twelve jobs for the price of one, for £1,255.

'Thanks to Jon, the photographer, for breaking my heart and then trying to make amends for it by doing free things for me like this.'

And I continue to list the cost of everyone and everything in the show. It is a rupture in the fabric of this badly constructed theatricality. The budget, like my boredom, like my hunger, rips through the show. It feels painful and pointless and unsatisfying.

At some point, I ask for the budget list because I can't remember the numbers. I read the items on the budget: 'Twin's makeup: £20. Dance class: £0. Twin's wigs: £29.98. That sign: £1,600'. And a massive painted festoon sign gleaming with flashing lights reading 'The Famous!' across a shooting star appears, slowly lowered from above – clearly paid for and constructed only for this asinine and expensive moment of the show.

The list continues for ten lengthy minutes, long after I've finished my meal. I get bored. Time to move on. 'Noah, can you play the next track?'

Another Leona Lewis ballad, *Happy* (2009), comes on, which I sing, with heartfelt emotion, as I am lowered back down to the ground... *I just wanna be hap-py... yeah...*

The song is over. It feels like this show should end. But it doesn't. 'Bring me back my broken things,' I ask, lying rather helplessly on the floor, as the exhaustion of the show and the numbness of my body from hanging upside down for so long renders my body fairly unmovable. And the cast brings forward three items: two watermelons, shattered, held together with a mixture of skewers, tape, and glue; and my wig, now the size of my entire body, as it was combined with all the fallen snowflake hair with tape and staples. The melons are placed by my side; the wig placed on my head and laid over my body.

'Um. Can we do that song again, but this time with the backup dancers?' And, as the song restarts, out of nowhere, 25 variously naked/half-naked, vaguely familiar, animal-masked people – my 'woodland friends' – roll onto the stage. Like an episode of a competition-based reality show, the 25 people, a mix of dancers and non-dancers, break out into a cheesy, literal, and expressive choreographic sensation, circling me as I sing from my position on the floor. An old theatrical trick– so satisfying in its banality, and so gratifyingly out of context.

The dance goes on. It builds and develops until the song's bridge, when rolls of toilet paper start to cascade through the air, in time with the music. The dancers run and leap with them, solo, in groups, all at once, until the crescendo of the last chorus. Here, they toss nearly 75 rolls over and through the air to the beat of the song, creating billowy streams over the stage, and then falling in piles of trash on the floor.

The song ends. The stage is now completely trashed.

'Thanks, guys. That was great. Noah, can we put that song on again? Sorry, guys,' I say to the audience, 'I'm just not finished yet.' And yet, everyone hoped it would have ended by now. But the song repeats. I sing my heart out. I guess. I sing to the audience. I

sing into the camera still in my face. I sing until I am dragged offstage by the rope tied to my feet, grasping to the stage as if I wasn't quite finished. Because I'm not. The story doesn't ever really end. I didn't die and I didn't live; I didn't succeed, and I didn't fail; everything breaks and everything repairs and everything doesn't repair; or, actually, all of those things happened. At once. So there is no end. At least no satisfying one. But the curtain comes down anyway. Oh well.



Figure 6: Krista Vuori in *Splat!*, The Barbican, 2013, image by Jon Cartwright

## Chapter One

### Artistic Lineage: From the 60s to the Present

Underlying the discomfort with my work, evidenced by the tabloid articles and various emails, is perhaps the notion that I can be both the *object* of study and the *subject* who delivers it – that I maintain authority as subject over my own body. Seminal performance artists from the 1960s and 70s constitute a significant starting point for this project primarily because of the way artists like Hannah Wilke and Carolee Schneemann have made work that focuses particularly on the subject-object dilemma, similarly challenging misogynist expectations around female authorship.<sup>1</sup> Wilke and Schneemann, along with Lynn Hershman, have made work that pose questions, I argue, that are still relevant today regarding female subjectivity, directly establishing a contextual basis for my own practice. In this chapter, I will begin by discussing works that emerged at the crux of the second of wave of feminism, which, necessarily, preceded my work. While contextually stemming from the work of artists from the 1960s and 70s, however, my work situates itself in a contemporary moment alongside the work of artists like Ann Liv Young, GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN, and Nao Bustamante. These contemporary artists are making work that confronts the post-feminist cultural context and are working with various strategies of negativity to facilitate their critiques. In this chapter, I will lay out the ways in which these particular artists resist and disrupt problematic representations of female subjectivity in their performances. I will show how these artists are working with similar strategies, and with similar effects and affects, to those discussed in future chapters in relation to my own practice, in order to offer a more comprehensive context

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<sup>1</sup> Other artists from the period who also address this issue include: Ana Mendieta, Gina Pane, Yoko Ono, Linda Montano, and Valie Export.

through which to read my work and its imperatives, situating my practice within a lineage of feminist performance from the 1960s and 70s to the present.

### **The Art and Influence of Performance Artists from the 1960s and 70s**

Schneemann's 1964 film *Fuses* pictures Schneemann and her partner at the time, the composer James Tenney, having sex in a number of scenes filmed over three years, stitched together and edited through Schneemann's various film-modification techniques, including scratching, dyeing, and burning the celluloid. As Rebecca Schneider notes in *The Explicit Body in Performance*, Schneemann is at once subject and object in this film, viewer and viewed; she is the eye behind the camera, and she is the body in front of it. Her nude body is on display for the spectator, a position that carries with it assumptions of powerlessness and passivity – yet Schneemann has clearly chosen to place her body there, in this position of object. Moreover, she is the artist-author-authority, further establishing her agency. Schneemann's work caused a lot of controversy – despite the presence of equally explicit works by male artists – and was often dismissed as narcissistic, exhibitionist, and reactionary. As Schneider points out, the problem with women's work was not nudity, nor sexual display, but rather '*the agency of the body displayed*.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance*, p. 35. Emphasis in original.



Figure 1: Carolee Schneemann and James Tenney in *Fuses*, 1964-7

Schneemann often expresses her interest in blurring the dichotomous lines between the association of activity with the male subject and passivity with the female object. In a lecture regarding *Fuses*, she discusses,

The equitable activity of the genitals themselves so that the female herself is not object more than the man being object. She's subject, as well as his being subject. Perhaps that's what is critical – that the man has finally been imaged by the woman (artist) [...]. It is edited very consciously that where there are images of the female genital, it will cut to the male genital, so that you are just beginning to face your



attitude about the one – whether its your own or the other – and then you have to immediately shift and say here is the equivocation that the doubling hits.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, in her introduction to her curated event *Erotic Films by Women* at the Telluride Film Festival in 1977, she stated, ‘we [women] take the forbidden camera into our own hands. We are not actresses extending or sustaining anyone’s image of what is “female”. Each of these films demonstrates concrete experience, the lived-life, not an invented, fantasized sexuality.’<sup>4</sup> Here, she clearly points to the political implications of taking hold of the camera – the position of subject, author, authority – in order to re-write the meaning of its ‘object’. That my work, as a scholar, lecturer and artist, is concerned with the re-writing of the ‘object’s’ meanings and endowing it with agency through my own authorship, is threatening to the cultural stability exercised by dominant culture, which works to maintain gender normativity through its continuation of patriarchal principles, like the incessant commodification of the female body. In a piece of unpublished writing, Schneemann describes,

The use of my own body as integral to my work was confusing to many people. I WAS PERMITTED TO BE AN IMAGE/BUT NOT AN IMAGE-MAKER CREATING HER OWN SELF-IMAGE. If I had only been dancing, acting, I would have maintained forms of feminine expression acceptable to the culture: “be the image we want”.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Royanne Rosenberg, ‘Transcript of Slide Lecture’, October 1973, Carolee Schneemann Papers, 1959-1994, 950001, Box 7 Folder 8.

<sup>4</sup> Carolee Schneemann, Introduction to ‘Erotic Films by Women’, Telluride Film Festival, 4 September 1977, Carolee Schneemann Papers, 1959-1994, 950001, Box 6 Folder 3.

<sup>5</sup> Carolee Schneemann, ‘Istory of a Girl Pornographer’, 1974-5, pp. 2-3, Carolee Schneemann

Hannah Wilke explored similar themes in her practice. One work, entitled *So Help Me Hannah*, is a group of 48 photographs of Wilke, nude or partially nude, holding a gun, which were taken at P.S.1, New York, and were displayed there in 1978 in an exhibition titled *Hannah Wilke: Snatch Shots with Ray Guns*, alongside a selection of quotes on the wall and a large group of ray guns or objects in its shape on the floor. Beginning in 1979, at other venues in New York and Washington, D. C., Wilke created *So Help Me Hannah* as a live performance with a sound track and a visual display that was videotaped by two cameramen on stage with Wilke, one of whom was involved in a kind of 'dance' with the artist. As Wilke writes, 'the cameraman participates as dancer, voyeur, lover, and artist, but under the direction of the ~~woman~~ Wilke, who retains the authority of the artist, the creator of the performance.'<sup>6</sup> For Wilke, even though she is the object in front of the camera, it is important for her to maintain her authority as artist and director, retaining her position as both object and subject of the work.

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Papers, 1959-1994, 950001, Box 6 Folder 2. Emphasis in original.

<sup>6</sup> Hannah Wilke, 'So Help Me Hannah', press release for P.S. 1 exhibition *Hannah Wilke: Snatch Shots with Ray Guns*, 1979, Hannah Wilke Collection and Archive, Los Angeles, Uncatalogued.



Figure 2: Hannah Wilke, *So Help Me Hannah*, 1978, 1 of a series of 48 photographs, Performalist Self-Portrait with Donald Goddard, Hannah Wilke Collection and Archive, Los Angeles, Copyright Donald Goddard, Courtesy Alison Jacques Gallery

Part of these artists' struggle for authority over their own bodies is the way in which the displayed female body was demonized. As Wilke wrote in 1973,

In the United States the state of nudity is still a problem. My concern is with the word translated into form, with creating a positive image to wipe out the prejudices, aggression, and fear associated with the negative connotations of pussy, cunt, box.<sup>7</sup>

For Schneemann, this was also an issue, along with the censoring of her work because of the nudity involved. Her famous work *Meat Joy*, performed in Paris in 1964, which involved a group of men and women rolling, rubbing, laughing, and dancing with slabs of meat and fish, was meant to be performed naked. Instead they wore bikinis, 'as a compromise,' because their nudity was prohibited.<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, as Schneemann states, 'the fact that the female genital was taboo or constantly reconstructed as a kind of fetish in popular culture; and also in high art, too' contributed to 'the denial of [her] pronoun and [her] genital' in her experience as an artist.<sup>9</sup> Schneemann, and many other female artists of her era, struggled for recognition. While working in Hannah Wilke's archives, her sister, Marsie Scharlatt, declared that it's been the family's goal to get her work into museums because, during her life, women were rarely included in museum shows or permanent collections. Lynn Hershman's

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<sup>7</sup> Hannah Wilke, 'Intercourse With...', text used in videotaped performance and lecture at the London Art Gallery, London, Ontario, Canada, 17 February 1977; originally written for Guggenheim Memorial Foundation grant, 1976, Hannah Wilke Collection and Archive, Los Angeles, Uncatalogued.

<sup>8</sup> Carolee Schneemann, 'Sexual Damming is Expressive Damning', 1963, Carolee Schneemann Papers, 1959-1994, 950001, Box 6 Folder 2.

<sup>9</sup> Kathy Constantinides, 'Carolee Schneemann: Invoking Body Politics', in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Winter 1991, Carolee Schneemann Papers, 1959-1994, 950001, Box 67 Folder 15.

concern for women's and women artists' visibility is also a thread throughout her work. One of Hershman's most recent projects, a documentary film entitled *!Women Art Revolution* (2010), is precisely about the absence of female artists in American museums. With archival footage featuring some of the most influential feminist artists of the 1960s and 1970s (including Hannah Wilke, Martha Rosler, Guerrilla Girls and Judy Chicago), she documents a history of women's production, exclusion and invisibility. Hershman writes about herself and other women being written out of history as a way of 'castrating women; [it] makes them impotent and powerless.'<sup>10</sup>

From 1974-76, Hershman worked as the associate project director for a large-scale site-specific installation with artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude called *Running Fences, Sonoma and Marin Counties, 1972-1976*.<sup>11</sup> Left out of reviews of the work, her colleague George Auerbach Koopman wrote a letter to the *New Yorker* politely complaining about their lack of acknowledgment of Hershman's instrumentality in the making of the project,<sup>12</sup> to which the author Calvin Tomkins replied with an apology and

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<sup>10</sup> Lynn Hershman, 'Invisibility and the Plight of the Eradicated', Lynn Hershman-Leeson Papers, M1452, Box 20 File 14, Stanford University, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford.

<sup>11</sup> 'Private I: An Investigator's Timeline', in *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson: Secret Agents, Private I*, ed. by Meredith Tromble (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, and Seattle: Henry Art Gallery and University of Washington, 2005), pp. 12-103 (p. 23).

<sup>12</sup> George Auerbach Koopman, Auerbach Koopman, George, Letter to Calvin Tomkins of *New Yorker Magazine*, 29 April 77, Lynn Hershman-Leeson Papers, M1452, Box 20, File 14, Stanford University, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford.

a promise to include her in the book he was writing on the project.<sup>13</sup> But Hershman takes note of this, along with other, more purposeful moments of disregard, as in another review of the same project by artist Tom Marioni, to which complaint the author responded, 'Sure Lynn, we all know you did the work, but no one's ever heard of you'; or from Peter Selz on Hershman's assistance on the publication of his book about artist Sam Francis, 'You should be grateful for having the opportunity to work with me.'<sup>14</sup> These responses, with the exception of Tomkins', are obviously outrageous and offensive, and clearly indicate the masculinist culture in which Hershman, and other female artists, were made invisible, their contributions ignored or rendered utterly insignificant.

As Schneemann explains, a lot of the dismissal of her work was based on the fact that she displayed her body. She describes taking her 1963 photographic work *Eye/Body* to various curators, who, she writes, 'uniform[ly] said [...] "these are very sexy, but they have nothing to do with art – nothing."' <sup>15</sup> Equally, Schneemann's response to criticism after her performance of *Meat Joy*, 'I didn't stand naked in front of 300 people because I wanted to be fucked', indicates the way in which her work was dismissed, whereby the presentation of the naked female body, rather than understood in its criticality, was perceived as pathological.<sup>16</sup>

One of Schneemann's most recognized works, *Interior Scroll*, explicitly confronts this problem. Performed twice, once at an exhibition involving a series of performances in East Hampton, New York, entitled *Women Here and Now* in 1975, and again at the

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<sup>13</sup> Calvin Tomkins, Letter to George Auerbach Koopman, 23 May 77, Lynn Hershman-Leeson Papers, M1452, Box 20, File 14, Stanford University, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford.

<sup>14</sup> Hershman, 'Invisibility and the Plight of the Eradicated'.

<sup>15</sup> Constantinides, 'Carolee Schneemann: Invoking Body Politics'.

<sup>16</sup> Schneemann, 'Istory of a Girl Pornographer', p. 2.

Telluride Film Festival in 1977, *Interior Scroll* begins with Schneemann wrapped in a sheet, which she drops in order to paint herself (1975) or apply strips of mud (1977) in a 'ritualistic' style.<sup>17</sup> She then removes a scroll of paper from her vagina, from which she reads. The text read in her first performance, from her book *Cézanne, She Was a Great Painter* (1976), comments directly on the way in which female artists were dismissed and ignored. She writes,

BE PREPARED:

[...] to be USED and MISUSED [...]

if you are a woman (and things are not utterly changed)

they will almost never believe you really did it

(what you did do) [...]

they will try to take what you did as their own

(a woman doesn't understand her best discoveries after all)

they will patronize you humor you [...]

they will deny your sexuality or your work [...]

they will forget whatever help you give.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Carolee Schneemann, *Imaging her Erotics: Essays Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 154-5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 156-7.



Figure 3: Carolee Schneemann, *Interior Scroll*, 1975, photo by Anthony McCall

The text used in the second performance, which was from her film *Kitch's Last Meal* (1975), equally indicates the way in which her work was overlooked. She writes:

I met a happy man  
A structuralist filmmaker  
– but don't call me that  
– it's something else I do –  
he said we are fond of you  
you are charming  
but don't ask us



to look at your films  
we cannot  
there are certain films  
we cannot look at  
the personal clutter  
the persistence of feelings  
the hand-touch sensibility  
the diaristic indulgence  
the painterly mess  
the dense gestalt  
the primitive techniques.<sup>19</sup>

As Schneider explains, 'if dismissive attitudes toward women artists had entered her body, gotten "under her skin" as it were, she exorcized them again with fury,' in her performance of *Interior Scroll*, as if to say, "'You want a diaristic, messy, female artist? Here you go!'"<sup>20</sup> Schneemann was often pathologized, her work dismissed on the grounds that it was narcissistic or self-indulgent. Just as her second *Interior Scroll* text indicates, in which her perceived 'diaristic indulgence' and 'personal clutter' resulted in her work being dismissed, she explains in another text, 'Istory of a Girl Pornographer' (1974-5), how her art professor in the 1950s often referred to her self-portrait paintings as narcissistic, even though her male colleagues were also painting self-portraits.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>20</sup> Rebecca Schneider, 'Remembering Feminist Remimesis: A Riddle in Three Parts', *TDR: The Drama Review*, 58,2 (2014), 14-32 (p. 20).

<sup>21</sup> Schneemann, 'Istory of a Girl Pornographer', p. 1.

Amelia Jones argues, however, that Hannah Wilke's practice of 'self-imaging', and her constant production of 'herself' in, and as, her work, is a radical and critical strategy that challenges the notion of 'narcissistic femininity' through its reiteration.<sup>22</sup> Wilke's diptych *I Object: Memoirs of a Sugargiver* (1977-78), a play on Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés* (1946-66), is a particularly effective example of Wilke's engagement with narcissism in order to challenge the association of 'the female body with a debased and quintessentially objectified self-love.'<sup>23</sup> Duchamp's piece invites the viewer to press their eye against a peep hole, through which they see a nude female body with a gash in place of her genitals. Wilke's photographs show her nude body lying on a rock, one photograph taken from below and the other from above, reproducing a similar perspective of the female body to the body in Duchamp's piece.<sup>24</sup> As Jones explains, Wilke is transformed into the position of subject as the author of these images, as well as its object, thereby acting as a critique of Duchamp's objectification of female genitalia. As Jones writes, '[Wilke] proclaims her objection ("I object...") to [...] the rigid conception of the gaze [...] (as necessarily male, necessarily oppressive, necessarily empowering) as well as to the gaze itself.'<sup>25</sup> This piece in particular, and Wilke's work generally, functions as a critique, not just of the gaze or its conception as oppressive, though, but of the disciplines of art history and criticism that, as Jones writes, 'legitimate (male or masculine) critical and artistic subjects in a closed and exclusionary circle of

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<sup>22</sup> Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 174.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* Also, interestingly, Wilke's sister, Marsie Scharlatt, noted that this piece was made near Duchamp's home in Cadaques, Spain, with the artist Richard Hamilton who was also a celebrated Duchamp scholar.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

male privilege.<sup>26</sup> Wilke's reiteration of female narcissism in her critical appropriation of Duchamp works to undermine and critique masculinist modes of viewership and criticism, 'providing a feminist mode of production that itself performs a woman-as-artist in an empowering way.'<sup>27</sup> Her choice of title further emphasizes that notion. Duchamp often presented himself as '*Marchand du Sel*', a 'Salt Seller', a play on his name, while Wilke appropriates that term, and, indeed, 'feminizes' it, naming herself the 'Sugargiver'. In her appropriation, she subverts Duchamp's association with commodification, delivering, instead, 'her sweet body' as a strategy of rejecting modes of capitalist exchange and the art market's masculinist circle of exclusion and privilege.<sup>28</sup>



Figure 4: Hannah Wilke, *I Object: Memoirs of a Sugargiver*, 1977-78, Performalist Self-Portrait with Richard Hamilton, Hannah Wilke Collection and Archive, Los Angeles, Copyright Marsie,

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 176.

In the case of Schneemann and Wilke, the accusations that their work was self-indulgent, narcissistic, or exhibitionist because of their physical display brings us back to the discussion on the double-position of these artists as both object and subject of their work.<sup>29</sup> Referring to these artists as exhibitionist or narcissistic denies them the political agency they might otherwise possess. Like the figure of the whore discussed in the introduction and later in chapter three, feminist performance artists who participate in the dialectical position of both agent and object, 'seller' and 'commodity', like Schneemann and Wilke, disrupt dominant ideologies around the displayed female body and female sexuality.

**Contemporary Context: Ann Liv Young, GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN, and Nao Bustamante**

While the work of Hannah Wilke and Carolee Schneemann lay the groundwork for the central concerns of my practice, my work situates itself in a contemporary context, in which post-feminist cultural politics highly impacts representations of female subjectivity, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis. Other female artists whose work directly engages with post-feminism and the culture of affirmation, such as Ann Liv Young, GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN, and Nao Bustamante, make use of strategies of negativity, as in my own practice discussed in chapter four, such as strategic ineptitude, incompleteness and mess. These artists' engagement with these particular strategies, in order to challenge the affirmation-based constructions of post-feminist subjectivity, significantly contextualizes my own practice.

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<sup>29</sup> Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance*, pp. 34-5.

### **Ann Liv Young: Sherry Tries on Cinderella**

Ann Liv Young, a contemporary performance-maker based in New York, strategically utilizes forms of negativity in her performances, playing with ineptitude, mess, and aggression in order to unhinge problematic female subjectivities. Like *Cupcake*, Young's *Sherry Tries on Cinderella* (2010), performed at Triple Canopy in Brooklyn, New York, inhabits an ambiguous space between representation and 'reality', shuttling back and forth between the two. Young's southern belle character Sherry – part-time conservative radio-show host, part-time feminist – literally tries on the character of Cinderella. With brightly colored balloons scattered across the floor, which occasionally and poignantly pop throughout the evening, and a stage littered with glitter and kitchen knives – appearing like a scene out of a murderous teenage slumber party – Young's show never really begins (and has already begun.) The transition from 'before the performance' to 'the performance' is hazy and unset: Young's sound-check somehow unknowingly segues into 'the show,' or it already was the show. Or there is no show.

For the first half of the performance, Sherry sings along to various tracks – sometimes emo-pop, sometimes rap. Between songs, she sweetly engages in discussion with audience members about their expectations and fears of experiencing one of her performances – making it even more equivocal as to whether this, itself, is even the performance. Moreover, in these innocuous hours of song and conversation, it is unclear if we are speaking to Ann Liv Young or Sherry.

After a dance party/intermission, Sherry (I think) returns to the stage asking for a volunteer. Once the female spectator dons two plain white t-shirts, as requested, Sherry, with a hand on the woman's heart, spouts new-age words of calm to the sacrificial lamb; two more volunteers are asked to massage her palms. Then, to everyone and no one's

surprise, a tray of poop is brought to the stage. She proceeds to 'make art,' as she refers to it, taking a handful of feces and smearing it on the white t-shirt, and invites the audience to participate as well. (One member agrees.) Interestingly, in a particularly nuanced deployment of strategic ineptitude, she (Young? Sherry?) refuses to call herself an artist, and only in this moment of fecal-collage and spectator-humiliation was the term 'art' deemed acceptable.

After the perilous poop fiasco (during which it almost spills numerous times on my head), Sherry changes costumes so that she can attempt her performance of Cinderella. She returns, singing and reciting nearly inaudible monologues from her printed script, much like a quiet and mousy aspiring princess might. But once through the pages, she informs the audience of a moment from the previous night's show: at the same moment of the piece, when she asked the audience what they thought of Cinderella's monologues, one member replied that the writing was 'cliché.' Young/Sherry/Cinderella describes, for the next hour, how she would like to torture, violate, and abuse this particular audience member, inventing ludicrous and atrocious methods of raping and destroying her body. She proceeds by verbally pouncing on a spectator who had been quiet throughout the evening, claiming that if she – this timid audience member – were present at the torturing of the other, she would do nothing to stop it. This quickly segues into a description of hanging the timid spectator in the middle of the gallery.

When another spectator interrupts her tirade in an attempt to prevent (or provoke) further abuse, Young/Sherry/Cinderella calls attention to her ambiguous identity. Is the spectator angry with Sherry? With Cinderella? In a fit of rage, the amorphous persona betrays her entire audience, storms backstage, and throws or breaks a number of things out of our view. Realizing that she will not return, the audience decides that 'the show' is over – if there was ever a show to begin with. 'The end' was just as unclear as 'the beginning.' There was nothing to do but clap awkwardly and revel in the mess.

In 'Like a Girl' s Name: The Adolescent Drag of Amber Hawk Swanson, Kate Gilmore, and Ann Liv Young,' Anna Watkins Fisher discusses a review in *The New York Times* of Young's *Cinderella* (2010), in which the reviewer, Alastair Macaulay, criticizes the work precisely for its ineptitude. Macaulay writes '[the show] demonstrated many layers of failure. Principally, Ms. Young lacks technique [...] She had to consult notes, repeat passages to get them right and tell her audio technician to change things.'<sup>30</sup> As Watkins points out,

Macaulay proves unable to recognize her as an artist for whom failure is the condition of possibility for creating something unpredictable and surreal, indeed for her own kind of success. Poorly fitting prom dress, campy animal balloons, terrible wigs, false starts, cheesy pop music — calling Young's performances 'bad' is like calling Santa chubby.<sup>31</sup>

What Watkins indicates here is the way in which Young's work employs ineptitude, or failure, as strategies that constitute the work itself. The work's failure is not only inherent, but is productively engaged in order to generate 'unpredictable' outcomes, which work to complicate her representation of the female subjectivities she inhabits (and abandons.)

As Young stated in an interview, 'I am [regularly] asked what is real and what is not real. What is planned and what is not planned. Mostly, people are confused about

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<sup>30</sup> Alastair Macaulay, 'This Time the Trouble Isn't Wicked Stepsisters,' *New York Times*, 5

September 2010

[www.nytimes.com/2010/09/06/arts/dance/06cinderella.html?\\_r=2&ref=alastair\\_macaulay](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/06/arts/dance/06cinderella.html?_r=2&ref=alastair_macaulay)

[accessed 15 April 2016].

<sup>31</sup> Anna Watkins Fisher, 'Like a Girl's Name: The Adolescent Drag of Amber Hawk Swanson, Kate Gilmore, and Ann Liv Young', *TDR: The Drama Review* 56:1(2012), 48-76, p. 61.

reality and fiction and its relationship to my normal everyday life.<sup>32</sup> Young's work plays between 'reality' and representation, much like *Cupcake*, as I investigate in chapter four.

Furthermore, like the blurring of the show and exterior reality, Young's personas messily overlap. It is almost impossible to distinguish which of her three identities – Young, Sherry or Cinderella – is in the space performing, particularly because they are often performing each other (e.g. Sherry performing Cinderella). This strategic confusion of subjectivities reads much like Lynn Hershman's deployment of multiple selves discussed in chapter three, – although perhaps more clearly theatrical and certainly more volatile – whereby Young critically undermines the possibility of essentialism. Additionally, that her southern belle and her mousy princess become aggressive and violent, destroying the possibility of the show ever being 'a show' by disrupting it and cutting it short (or 'cutting it short'), those female subjectivities are also cut short and rendered dissatisfying. Young's inept, inaudible, and interrupted songs, monologues, and identities reveal her tactical play with ineptitude, whereby blurring the lines between 'the show' and 'not-the-show' becomes a crucial feminist strategy.

Furthermore, Young's deployment of violence as a strategy – in her verbal torture of the audience member and in her violent tantrum backstage – sparks a kind of dark negativity, creating a discomfort and confusion, and perhaps, for some, anger, as Young refuses to produce a satisfying and affirmative show. Young's work powerfully embraces negativity as a mode through which to critique the narrow constructions of femalehood she alternatively inhabits in her performance. Through her anger, and inevitable failure to complete 'the show', Young destroys those problematic subjectivities in the process.

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<sup>32</sup> Anna Conlan, 'She's Magnificent, She's Nuts: Anna Conlan Emails Ann Liv Young and (the Delicious) Erica Beckman Photographs Her', *Dance Theatre Journal*, 23,2 (2009), 30-6 (p. 33).



## GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN: *Big Hits!*

GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN, a London based performance company, makes work that is particularly interested in resisting satisfaction, although with perhaps a subtler smack than Young. *Big Hits!* (2012) is a show that makes a lot of promises. It will 'raise us up', 'lift us up', 'Hallelujah!' It will affirm and inspire; it will overcome pain and hardship; it will make us feel good! It is a show that overcomes, overcommits, and over-offers. It sells us a hollow kind of affirmation that shines like a glitterball and cracks like an Easter egg. *Big Hits!* is *X-Factor* exposed, a sensationalized concoction of 'raw talent', personal traumas, and dramatic epiphanies. Through reiterating problematic popular culture constructions of female subjectivity, *Big Hits!* effectively destabilizes them. It is a show wrapped and delivered in exactly what it critiques, and yet, somehow, it critiques with a (slow, but effective) punch.

*Big Hits!* begins with two of the three GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN members, Jennifer Pick and Lucy McCormick (the latter of whom performs in both of my shows within this thesis), welcoming the audience. They introduce themselves, they introduce the show, and they welcome the audience again. And introduce the show. Again. For 20 minutes.

Jen is dressed in a white, furry, full-bodied bunny-suit, bunny head stuffed in a top hat tucked under her arm, wig cap covering her hair, and a giant headset microphone taped crudely to her face. A real 'bunny girl'. Or, as Lucy later points out, Jen's naïve misinterpretation of a 'bunny girl.' Lucy, on the other hand, is dressed in a black leotard with a sheer panel down the center, a long skirt that is transparent apart from the few inches covering her pelvis, and giant, white, platform heels. The brunette and the blonde, the bunny and the 'bunny' – dry, strait-faced sarcasm coming from Jen on stage right, and

wet, giggly flirtation coming from Lucy on stage left (with sexual passes made at the audience all night.)

‘Have we got a show for you!’ yells Jen enthusiastically. ‘We’re gonna lift you up, we’re going to raise you up, we’re going to save you! Tonight is about giving you *what you want*,’ (cue Lucy’s sexualized interpretation and slutty response, ‘yeah, really guys, *whatever* you want. Just let me know.’) They go on to explain that in order to ‘lift you up’, Lucy will be singing Leonard Cohen’s *Hallelujah* (1984), the backing track of which we will hear 11 times over the next hour and 40 minutes. Jen, on the other hand, is ‘something nice to look at’, Lucy explains, ‘to make you feel safe and secure, like a best friend or a pet.’ Jen pulls her bunny head out of the hat, and, using it like a puppet, yelps ‘oh hello!’ at the audience, as if her voice has been injected with helium. They continue by introducing Craig, who will be assisting them. After Jen tells the audience, ‘he does tend to play the victim a lot,’ Lucy warns, ‘don’t fall for it. Cuz he actually thinks it’s quite funny when you do.’ ‘CRAIG!’ Jen yells, and a short hairy topless man comes in, with fake blood covering his entire chest.<sup>33</sup>

Craig’s role throughout the remainder of the show is a similar play on this pun – he consistently enacts, or delivers, surface-level jokes that work to undermine his authority, revealing VAN’s play with popular culture’s strange marriage of superficiality and narratives of trauma. As discussed in an unpublished interview with Hester Chillingworth, VAN member and director of *Big Hits!*, they were interested in the way in which the popular singing competition and reality show *X-Factor* focuses strongly on the contestant’s personal narratives of trauma, positioning their singing as a kind of redemption or emancipation from their personal pain. The ‘success story’ of the winner of the competition is often narrativized as a process of transformation, from previous trauma

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<sup>33</sup> All quotations from this performance, unless otherwise stated, are my own transcriptions from documentation of the performance.

to future success. VAN stages 'success' and 'affirmation' in direct relation to pain, trauma, and victimization, throughout this show, utilizing strategic ineptitude, superficiality (often in the form of the pun) and 'blue-balling' as modes of interrupting those narratives and revealing their surface-level construction.

After 20 more minutes of introducing the show and more affirmative statements, Lucy shocks us with a virtuosic moment of beautiful singing. She continues for awhile, before undermining herself by sing-screaming the song, until it ends, we clap, and Craig fetches her a bottle of water. Lucy then announces to the audience, that 'just for you guys, because you liked the rabbit so much, we're gonna do that again for you!' After a pause, Lucy addresses the audience again, 'umm you guys, I feel like there might just be one or two people here who aren't really letting themselves have a good time yet and I just wanted to say if you are feeling quite negative, just try to get a grip and rise above because tonight is about BEING POSITIVE everyone! So we're gonna go again, and this time we're gonna do a bit more!'

The song begins again, and Jen, crouched on the floor, starts thumping her paw against the ground, really 'going for it' as the adorable bunny rabbit, to 'make us feel good'. During a later iteration of the song, Jen tells the audience, 'now I'm meant to be a bit of fluff, but Lucy is here to sing the song. And *Hallelujah* is a big song. There's a lot of pain there. A lot of backstory. "It's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah" – if you're listening to the lyrics. And the truth about Lucy is that she never really suffered. You haven't, have you Lucy?'

'Nope.'

'She's never really been through anything. Her parents are still together, she wasn't adopted, she's never been poor. She's never really had any burdens to bear. And she's never really been close to anyone carrying a really heavy weight on their

shoulders.’ (Craig, who has been holding the heavy speakers at on his shoulders for about 15 minutes now, is then asked to move out of the way.)

‘What she’s doing here is proving to you that she is willing to suffer for you. She is willing to go through pain if it will help her sing the song. And to be fair, she does usually sing better after this. So it’s best just to let her get on with it.’

What follows is a scene in which Lucy, propped on her knees, stage-slaps herself repeatedly, falling to the floor each time. Craig is then called in to ‘make it a more recognizable image’, and he begins to fake punch her as she does the movement. ‘There we go now, we’ve definitely seen that somewhere before,’ Jen says enthusiastically. ‘I’ll hand you over. Craig! Lucy! Big Hits!’ We hear a loud (fake) punch, and Lucy smiles at the audience.

Lucy’s fake violent scenes eventually turn into her harshly slapping her own ass repeatedly, over and over again, forcing the scene to completely exhaust itself. ‘Actually,’ she says ‘I’d just like to say that I am in a bit more pain now,’ and she thanks the audience for helping her ‘see’ what her pain ‘looks like.’ The show continues with more references to Lucy’s pain, as Jen reveals towards the end of the show, ‘Lucy asked me to say a few things to you about the real her and about the pain beneath the mask, and so on, if I got a chance tonight. But I didn’t get a chance. So you’ll just have to take her as you find her. How was that, Lucy?’ Jen asks, to which Lucy replies, ‘yeah, that was perfect, thank you’.

As Sarah Gorman writes in response to these violent scenes, ‘my sense is that they are partly intending to be ironic,’<sup>34</sup> which Gorman sites as a strategy that can be deployed either to re-stabilize or destabilize ‘the conservative values associated with conventional

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<sup>34</sup> Sarah Gorman, ‘“Do We Have a Show for You? Yes, We *Have* Got a Show for You!”: Sexual Harassment, GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN and the (Re)Appraisal of Postmodern Irony’, *Performance Research*, 19,2 (2014), 25-34 (p. 32).

gender roles' in postmodern performance.<sup>35</sup> But, as she continues, 'by letting the scene run for an extended period of time they deliberately mark the awkwardness of making light of sexualized violence.'<sup>36</sup> Rather than reinstate the role of Lucy as the abused victim, Gorman indicates, VAN's use of irony through this never-ending scene, actually works to destabilize that possibility. This is accomplished by revealing the discomfort in what I would refer to as pop culture's often superficial, or 'light', deployment of trauma often in order to attract audiences via the spectacle of other people's pain. In Lucy's complicit response to Jen's question, pain and trauma are flattened, rendered superficial, and trivialized, reflecting the way in which pop culture's superficial deployment of pain and trauma is often a kind of affective manipulation. But, in their exhaustive performance of the scene, rather than reinstate that trivialization, VAN reveals it as problematic.

The show ends, however, in an awkward moment of affirmation. Lucy and Jen abandon their roles as singer and bunny (by now the bunny is 'dead' anyway), and Craig is left to 'run through the end of the show.' The song is played again, and Craig literally runs through the end of the show, while Lucy and Jen drink water, laugh at him, and cheer him on. The sad but uplifting music, along with the women's cheering, creates an unsettling feeling of affirmation, as if we, too, should be cheering him along. Some audience members do. But this oxymoronic anti-climax, and Lucy and Jen's abandonment of their roles, inevitably obstructs – and renders incomplete – any feeling of affirmation we might otherwise have felt. VAN's strategic play with surface, 'incompleteness' and ineptitude undermines any attempt of re-creating the victim-to-affirmed narrative they cite. Through inhabiting this superficial *X-Factor* world, *Big Hits!*, like *Splat!*, unmakes that world, revealing its inherent failures and exploiting them in the process.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

### **Nao Bustamante: *America the Beautiful***

Nao Bustamante, a Mexican-American artist, creates powerful performances and video installations that work through problematic constructions of femalehood, particularly in relation to race. Her performance *America the Beautiful* (1995-98) explores the precarity of the white, blond pageant persona, constantly seeking affirmation from the audience, through which her stagings of ineptitude and mess effectively destabilize the success of that subjectivity.

The performance begins with Bustamante enacting a physical transformation along to a frenzy of circus music. With a curly blonde wig, and a slapdash application of red lipstick and white face powder, Bustamante over-acts and exaggerates her actions, like a bad soap opera actress. She then uses heavy, clear tape to mold her body, messily cinching her thighs and waist. Then, while precariously balancing on a step-ladder, she puts on a pair of white high-heeled shoes, almost falling a number of times in the process. As Judith Halberstam describes, 'she displays the demands of racialized feminine beauty' in these scenes of physical transformation, and her dangerous balancing act is a moment which 'confirm[s] the danger of such beauty'.<sup>37</sup>

Bustamante then climbs a very tall ladder, repeating and reinstating Halberstam's reading of this 'dangerous' or problematic subjectivity, upon which she performs various amateur and inept 'feats'. She does a shadow-puppet show; lights a sparkler; and, on her way down, squeezes her body through the ladder rungs. Once

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<sup>37</sup> Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 143.

beneath it, she stands, posing with her arms in the air, with a big grin on her face, awaiting her applause.

Throughout the performance, Bustamante repeatedly performs this exaggerated smile, a move that both emphasizes the 'successful' and affirmed subjectivity she attempts to fulfill, as well as her (strategic) ineptitude at succeeding. But this smile also points to her inhabited subjectivity's constant plea for affirmation. As Jose Muñoz cogently points out:

The protagonist [...] is a grotesquerie seeking approval, attempting both to mold her body and her comportment to be in sync with dominant maps of looking and feeling, especially looking and feeling both female and white. Her body and comportment is, by standardized expectations, excessive. Yet she seeks the approval or sanction of the normative. The piece's humor is produced by her stark and abject need for approval.<sup>38</sup>

The following scene powerfully asserts Muñoz's reading, as Bustamante spends nearly five whole minutes awkwardly (and hilariously) obliging the audience to clap for her, as she walks around the stage holding a bouquet of roses, smiling, shaking her head, and gesturing for the audience to 'stop' (but to really keep going), like a self-absorbed actress at the end of a play or on the acceptance of an award. As the scene continues, she rams a rose into her mouth, chews and eventually swallows, with a kind of frenetic and desperate energy. As Muñoz writes, this subjectivity 'is undone by her need of affirmative

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<sup>38</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, 'The Vulnerability Artist: Nao Bustamante and the Sad Beauty of Reparation', *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 16,2 (2006), 191-200 (p. 198).

feelings',<sup>39</sup> and she eventually takes herself behind the curtain from which we hear the sounds of retching. But Bustamante reappears with a gigantic smile, and the show continues with one more feat, as she badly performs a song by blowing into a number of bottles and randomly clicking castanets. When finished, she raises her face up to the audience, places her hand on her heart, smiles, and blows a kiss. She mouths 'I love you' as the lights fade to black, reiterating her character's love for, and need of, our affirmation.

Through this subject's performance of inept feats, her messy embodiment of white beauty, and her desperate need for affirmation, she undoes the power of those dominant signs of success. Through negativity, Bustamante enacts a kind of disruptive and messy criticality. As Muñoz describes, *America the Beautiful* 'clearly outlines the limits of affirmative affect, while gesturing to the ways in which agency can perhaps be accessed through exploration of the negative.'<sup>40</sup> Like what I will suggest about my own work, Bustamante effectively deploys negative strategies in order to inhabit a mode of agency, not dependent on 'success', (white) beauty, or affirmation, but one produced by mess, failure, and negativity.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 199.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 199.



## Chapter Two

### Anti-Porn Feminisms: Victims, Prostitutes, and Man-Haters

*Splat!*'s unapologetic deployment of the displayed female body, as described in the previous interlude and which I will discuss in detail in chapter four, along with the various artists discussed in chapter one, prompts a need to engage head-on with the 'problem' of sex and its representation for historical and contemporary feminisms. This chapter is concerned with the way in which the displayed female body is often demonized in mainstream culture, and looks towards the anti-pornography strand of feminism of the 1970s and 80s and its appropriation by dominant culture to understand the persistence of this dilemma. Dominant culture has adopted the link between the displayed female body and victimization that seems to underlie much of anti-porn feminism's work. At the same time, it has used its most problematic tenets to scare young people away from feminism more broadly, resulting in a backlash. The source of these appropriated views boils down to one particular faction of feminism from the 1980s, namely the anti-pornography feminism of Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon – a movement that was neither mainstream nor representative of the range of feminisms arising in the period and its immediate aftermaths.

In this chapter, I will unpick some of the major tenets of anti-porn feminism, in order to examine the sources of its problematic integration into mainstream culture, and contradictorily, the widespread rejection of feminism based upon their circulation. I will then show how the conflation of the displayed female body with exploitation is still a present and pressing issue through a close reading of Marina Abramović's artistic direction of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art Gala in 2011, and the Toxic Titties' infiltration of Vanessa Beecroft's piece *VB46* at the Gagosian Gallery in Los Angeles in 2002.

## The Legacy of Anti-Porn Feminism

In the 1970s and 80s feminism underwent a major split, commonly known as the Sex Wars, or the Pornography Wars.<sup>1</sup> Though there were multifarious sectors and groups arising from these debates on pornography, the principal divide was between the anti-porn and the sex-positive factions. Rather than provide an overview of the Sex Wars and the numerous factions and groups involved, I focus on one of these two major factions, the anti-porn faction. The anti-porn faction itself went through a severe split, when Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon began teaming up with conservative politicians in order to pass censorship laws against pornography. I aim to show how the logic of victimization that demonizes physical display as misogynist and strips the displayed female body of its potential agency stems from the history of this particular anti-porn faction. This appropriated logic, I argue, is an unproductive and anachronistic method of criticality that is still in play.

I do not intend to vilify this strand of feminism, particularly because I do think it has made significant contributions despite its political inadequacy as a general theory of women's rights, and furthermore, I do not find it a useful strategy for feminism to turn its critique robustly against itself, rather than outward toward the powers that delimit or oppress women. While some of its positions are certainly problematic, anti-porn feminism was contextually part of a discourse. Those more radical notions were generally those that were least sustained by the sect as a whole, even if they have been picked up and re-circulated by dominant culture. For example, Andrea Dworkin's notion that all

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<sup>1</sup> For detailed readings of the Sex Wars, see Lisa Duggan and Nan Hunter, *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), or *Pornography and Feminism*, ed. by Drucilla Cornell (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

heterosexual intercourse constitutes violence against women was widely debated within feminism, but its subsequent naturalization and re-circulation has rendered 'feminism' equivalent with being both 'anti-men' and 'anti-sex' within dominant culture. I will begin with a short overview of this faction's development and its general concerns.

As second-wave feminism developed throughout the 1970s, pornography became a hot topic of dissent. In the late 70s, a group of feminists, including Susan Brownmiller and Gloria Steinem, began focusing their activism on fighting pornography. In Brownmiller's *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975), she contends that rape is part of a system whereby men maintain dominance over women through a process of intimidation and fear, refuting the then-common assumption that rape is an expression of desire or sexual attraction on the part of unruly or boisterous males.<sup>2</sup> For the anti-porn feminists, pornography promoted the culture of rape. Women Against Pornography, a New York-based group co-founded by Brownmiller, held the slogan 'pornography is the theory, rape is the practice.'<sup>3</sup> The anti-porn faction of feminism believed pornography to be, and be the cause of further, violence against women, calling for the abolition of pornography altogether. Pornography, they said, is as an expression and an enactment of male power, 'its nature, its magnitude, its use, its meaning,'<sup>4</sup> and that power is achieved by degrading women. As Alan Soble explains, the feminist critique of pornography involved: its content, which is degrading; its effects, whereby pornography perpetuates

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<sup>2</sup> Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1975).

<sup>3</sup> Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (London: Pocket Books, 2006), p. 61.

<sup>4</sup> Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (London: Women's Press, 1981), p. 24.

sexism and a culture which tolerates violence against women; and its production, which exploits women.<sup>5</sup>

These positions led to a rift, in which the anti-porn movement was criticized as anti-sex, and many feminists were concerned that the movement was undermining one of feminism's most significant battles: the fight for sexual liberation and female pleasure. The sex-positive feminists, as they began identifying, opposed the anti-porn faction, criticizing them for instilling another form of oppression.<sup>6</sup> Gayle Rubin, for instance, called for a 'pluralistic sexual ethics' in which, 'sexual variation', is sociologically crucial. She writes, 'whether [...] gay or straight, coupled or in groups, naked or in underwear, commercial or free, with or without video', a person's sexual preferences should not be limited to 'conform to a single standard.'<sup>7</sup> Anti-pornography feminism, she notes, particularly indicts sadomasochism, uncritically associating all pornography with sadomasochism, violence, and, then, rape.<sup>8</sup> Rubin also notes the way in which conservative politicians embraced the feminist anti-porn lexicon, through which they could easily criminalize sadomasochistic sexual behavior by associating it with violence against women.<sup>9</sup> For Rubin, the anti-porn faction dangerously constrained the diversity of sexual expression and could potentially lead to grave sexual oppression.

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<sup>5</sup> Alan Soble, *Pornography: Marxism, Feminism, and the Future of Sexuality* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 150.

<sup>6</sup> Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, p. 63.

<sup>7</sup> Gayle S. Rubin, 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality', *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 137-81 (p. 154).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

The anti-porn faction itself was broadly cognizant of their perceived conservatism, and they, too, underwent numerous splits and diversions of opinion.<sup>10</sup> While for some, like Andrea Dworkin, *all* pornography was seen as violent, others were concerned primarily with explicitly violent pornography, while others began attacking pornography that depicted 'sex without love or intimacy'.<sup>11</sup> But by far the most controversial split occurred when Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon drafted an ordinance in 1983 in which they outlined pornography as a violation of civil rights against women, a move that eventually aligned them with conservative lawmakers concerned with the eradication of porn on moral grounds.<sup>12</sup> Their ordinance was passed in Minneapolis, but vetoed twice by the mayor, and eventually brought to Indianapolis in 1984 by its conservative city council and Republican mayor. Then, in 1992, sections of MacKinnon's ordinance were used to create a law in Canada called the Butler decision, which regulated pornography and its circulation.<sup>13</sup>

As sex-positive feminist Pat Califia points out, this ordinance led to grave censorship of literature and scholarly works by and about gays and feminists, while it had 'no visible impact on the straight porn industry.'<sup>14</sup> For Califia, the anti-porn movement was particularly conservative, and, she argues, attempted to remove any discourse around gay and lesbian desire. As she writes, 'they have always been happy to work with homophobes, anti-abortion politicians, and right wingers.'<sup>15</sup> Like Rubin, Califia saw the anti-porn movement as perilously regulatory of sexual preferences and conduct. She

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<sup>10</sup> Soble, *Pornography*, p. 151.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>12</sup> Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, p. 64.

<sup>13</sup> Pat Califia, *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2000), p. 97.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 98-9.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

writes, anti-porn feminism 'reifies traditional values in virtually all areas of sexual expression and behavior,'<sup>16</sup> and here, she particularly cites the problematic work of Dworkin. In this last statement in particular, I find an accurate prognosis; for my main concern with the anti-porn faction is the way in which it has so strongly impacted mainstream culture, not only by the way in which mainstream (conservative) culture has adopted and appropriated its rhetoric, but in the way anti-porn feminism inadvertently mirrors mainstream culture's demonization of the body.

Dworkin and MacKinnon's work have had lasting impact on cultural views of both the body and feminism. I will continue by examining Dworkin's principal tenets alongside other problematic anti-porn positions, examining their portrayal of the displayed female body, its demonization, and its deeply rooted association with victimization.

Andrea Dworkin defines pornography as 'the graphic depiction of whores,'<sup>17</sup> a definition she arrives at through Greek etymology.<sup>18</sup> For Dworkin, men see all women as whores, trading their bodies for subsistence. Dworkin posits men's vision of women's 'natural' sexuality as a desire to use her sex to get what she wants. Furthermore, because, Dworkin argues, men see her as 'naturally a whore,' she can be used as such. As Dworkin writes, from the male perspective, 'a whore cannot be raped, only used. A whore by nature cannot be forced to whore – only revealed through circumstance to be the whore she is.'<sup>19</sup> Women who participate in pornography, she then suggests, are seen

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>17</sup> Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 200.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 204.

as twofold-whores: their inherent whore sexuality is doubled by their apparent choice to have sex on camera for money.<sup>20</sup>

Also a part of men's understanding of female sexuality, she argues, is the projection onto women of an inherent desire for violation. Men, in or out of pornography, Dworkin writes, regard violence as the woman's will – that, indeed, her 'femininity is realized through submission, [it] requires force.'<sup>21</sup> Men, she argues, do not see rape in opposition to female will. Dworkin borrows the words of Elizabeth Janeway to explain that rape, on- or off-camera, is not perceived as rape because women are understood to 'really like it that way.'<sup>22</sup> For Dworkin, "'really liking it that way'" is the ultimate survival necessity used by women,' implying that 'liking it' is always in quotations – sexual pleasure is performed by women to survive the structures of violation established by men.<sup>23</sup>

The structure of male violence, Dworkin insists, haunts women everyday – it is 'the basic material reality of women's lives.'<sup>24</sup> 'Male sexual domination', she writes, not only directs women's desires, it is:

a material system with an ideology and a metaphysics [...]. The institutions of control include law, marriage, prostitution, pornography, health care, the economy, organized religion, and systematized physical aggression against women (for example, in rape and battery).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>22</sup> Cited in Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 203.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 203.

What women are up against, she says, is not just pornography; it is the system of patriarchy, the 'male-supremacist ideology,'<sup>26</sup> that runs our lives, through which pornography is enabled and in which men are endowed with incontestable power allowing them to own, force, and terrorize. Resistance to patriarchal ideology is a major tenet of most strands of feminism. Dworkin's language, however, leads us towards a monolithic understanding of women's experiences, and of 'patriarchy', which leaves little space for critical or strategic relations towards men, towards culture, and specifically towards sex. Rather than condemn institutionalized and systematic sexism, Dworkin's language plainly condemns an entire sex, particularly through her projected insights into the male perspective of female desire. It is this aspect of her assertions that have been problematically re-distributed to stand-in for all feminisms, inaccurately equating feminism with a 'man-hating' ideology.

Dworkin's reliance on her interpretation of the male perspective is made further problematic by the way in which pleasure and sexual agency is stripped from female sexuality.<sup>27</sup> Dworkin describes a series of photographs in which a woman penetrates herself with a sword, cuts her breasts, and smears her blood over her body, all with a

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>27</sup> I use the term 'sexual agency' to make a slight distinction from the kind of 'critical agency' I introduce in the introduction and utilize throughout the rest of this thesis. Here, rather than refer to a kind of agency that might enact a kind of critical, transformative, or political power, I simply refer to the consent and active choice involved in one's sexual identity, preferences, and behavior. These two definitions are in no way mutually exclusive, but their differences need to be acknowledged. When not specified as 'sexual', my use of the term 'agency' refers to my original definition of it as a kind of performative criticality.



smile. That smile, Dworkin says, 'drives [her] mad.'<sup>28</sup> The portrayed enjoyment of the violence and violation she commits against herself, for the purpose of providing pleasure for the viewer, is horrifying to Dworkin. Her portrayed enjoyment exists in quotes – it is not really hers, it is forced, inscribed, and adopted. Dworkin continues by describing a poster advertisement for an album entitled *Plug Me to Death*, which pictures a woman's thighs, suggesting her crotch 'because we know it is there.'<sup>29</sup> She writes, 'and it is the use of the first person that drives me mad. "Plug Me to Death."'<sup>30</sup>

Portrayed in these particular images, for Dworkin, is undoubtedly the reflection of the male desire to dominate and force, falsely portrayed as the woman's desire, in order to give men permission for such a violation. While I certainly think her argument has merit – for it is clear that female sexuality has been, and remains, problematically determined in many ways by misogynist portrayals of it – what remains a problem here is that this desire is rendered a *false* pleasure, denied to the woman not just by 'male desire', but also by Dworkin herself. Dworkin's refusal to account for female pleasure, here and throughout her work, gravely delimits the potential for female desire, and how that might relate to her potential agency. Additionally, this line of thinking problematically reinstates misogynist accounts of female sexuality, for it was a common perception to see women's desires as a fiction, or at best a hysterical symptom. If women never really 'like it', or only learn to like it to endure male violence, it boils down to the same problem.

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<sup>28</sup> Andrea Dworkin, 'Pornography and Grief', in *Feminism and Pornography*, ed. by Drucilla Cornell (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 39-44.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43. Emphasis added.

Dworkin's rejection of the potential for female pleasure is not limited to sexual violence when she later expands her argument to intercourse itself.<sup>31</sup> Penetration is an act of violence and domination, she insists: 'fucking is the essential sexual experience of power and potency and possession; fucking by mortal men, regular guys.'<sup>32</sup> She calls for a radical rejection of heterosexual intercourse, of penetration, altogether, deeming sex itself a violent act. Women's never 'really liking it that way,' then, is not only applied to the violence of pornography, but to sex in general. The conflation of second-wave feminism with 'anti-sex' politics is founded in Dworkin's rejection of penetration, leading to the reductive view within mainstream discourse that all feminists 'hate men' and 'hate sex.'

For Dworkin, pleasure and violence are antithetical, and female pleasure within acts or representations of sex/violence is inconceivable. Dworkin's model of sex, consequently, denies women access to pleasure and, therefore, sexual agency, because any expression of pleasure within the violence of sex can never be her own. This reading of female pleasure is problematic, whereby little space is left for a woman to exercise her desires. If 'liking it' is never a question of desire, if heterosexual sex is always rape, always forced, the woman's choice is denied, her pleasure refuted, and she is reduced to a passive victim, therefore stripping her of the possibility or potential of agency she might access or enact.

The term 'victim' connotes suffering, loss, and helplessness. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as one who is 'badly treated or taken advantage of', one who is

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<sup>31</sup> Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (New York: The Free Press, 1987).

<sup>32</sup> Leo Bersani, 'Is the Rectum a Grave?', in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, ed. by Douglas Crimp, 5<sup>th</sup> edn. (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1996), pp. 197-222 (p. 214).

‘subjected’ or ‘oppressed’.<sup>33</sup> In Jan Zita Grover’s definition of ‘victim’ within the context of the AIDS crisis, she writes, ‘fear and pity are the emotions raised by the victim, and, as we know, these emotions are less than useless for dealing actively with serious issues.’<sup>34</sup> The result of these emotions roused by victimhood ‘implies that nothing, or next to nothing, can be done about the cultural, social, and medical crises presented by AIDS.’<sup>35</sup> For Grover, ‘fear and pity’ are unhelpful and unproductive emotions when handling significant matters such as the discourse around AIDS – a convincing claim that easily relates to rape, sexual abuse, prostitution, or other forms of gender oppression as well. Grover cogently indicates here that the representation of a subject as a victim also implies a helpless situation. A victim, by definition, is not one who acts, but one who is acted upon – its passive connotation indicating a lack of potential agency. Dworkin insists that during ‘the sex act [...] the woman is *acted on*.’<sup>36</sup> If sex is always violent to women, and thereby the woman ‘suffers’, and sex always happens *to* women, women are, by Dworkin’s definition, victims, and therefore, their access to agency becomes gravely limited.

The reliance on victimology comes through particularly in the anti-porn feminist’s use of testimony from porn stars, sex workers, or abuse victims. The assertion that there is a hidden victim within all sex or porn narratives is made clear in the section ‘Survivors of Pornography’ of Diana Russell’s *Making Violence Sexy* (1993). This group of six chapters provides a range of stories by and about women in or affected by pornography, dedicated

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<sup>33</sup> ‘Victim’, in *Oxford English Dictionary: Volume 19*, ed. by James A.H. Murray Henry Bradley, W.A. Craigie, and C.T. Onions, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 607.

<sup>34</sup> Jan Zita Grover, ‘AIDS: Keywords’, in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, ed. by Douglas Crimp, 5<sup>th</sup> edn. (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1996), pp. 17-30 (p. 29).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>36</sup> Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, p. 23. Emphasis added.

to personal testimonies exemplifying the victimization of women, in which women's false and forced desires and their accompanying abuse are revealed. A portrait of Angel Kelly – a rich and famous black porn star - comprises chapter three, in which the interviewer Campbell seeks to reveal the trauma and abuse underlying Kelly's success. Kelly describes her first job as an exotic dancer, in which she was required to masturbate in a glass-protected booth in front of the male patrons. 'The first time I took my clothes off in that booth, I remember feeling a rush. It was pleasing to me to be able to turn men on. Not everyone can do that.'<sup>37</sup> When Kelly talks about a friend's suicide, also a porn actress, Campbell writes,

When I suggested that there was a connection between having sex in front of a camera and suicide, Angel recovered her telephone poise. Her air of fragile vulnerability, so evident when she spoke of her dead friend, vanished. 'I'm not ashamed of what I've done,' she declared. 'I'm the first successful Black adult video actress.' Although Angel said she was a star, she reminded me of a wounded child grieving for the loss of her innocence. The more I listened to her, the more I wondered if becoming a porn star is what happened to her after something in her life had gone wrong.<sup>38</sup>

It is clear Campbell believes that by peering through the screen of pleasure erected by Kelly, she will uncover an inevitable pain, shame, or trauma repressed underneath. For Campbell, there is no possibility that Kelly's pleasure is sincere – or if it is, it must be

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<sup>37</sup> Bebe Moore Campbell, 'A Portrait of Angel: The Life of a Porn Star', in *Making Violence Sexy: Feminist Views on Pornography*, ed. by Diana Russell (New York: Teachers College Press 1993), pp. 32-6 (p. 34).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

because a painful trauma taught her to find pleasure within the male lexicon of degradation. Campbell's hunch is proven when Kelly later reveals that she was sexually abused as a child by her father. Kelly is clearly portrayed as masking her own sexuality by identifying the male perspective of female (whore) sexuality as her own; but, as Russell shows through Kelly, that mask can fall down. The mask of whorish pleasure is provided by the male lexicon of domination, and what women believe to be their own desire is never their own. While I agree that what Kelly might understand to be her own desire, or her own agency, is compromised, whereby her own sexual desires are sharply negotiated by the masculinist structure of sexuality in which she is participating,<sup>39</sup> the problem I see here, however, is that Campbell's tacit argument signals that beneath the mask of 'whore' adopted by women, placed on them by men, is a *victim*. Like Dworkin, Campbell asserts that 'the whore' is never really a whore, but a victim, whose innocence has been tarnished by a guiltless and involuntary appropriation of male desire. Within the anti-pornography lexicon, there is no such thing as a woman who is a whore – on purpose, with agency, with pleasure. She is always a victim in disguise.

Women's victimization, anti-porn feminists argue, is not just a result of the male violence which pornography instantiates; it is also constituted by pornography itself. Dworkin argues that human sexuality is highly impacted by the sex-as-power narrative of pornography, quoting human sexuality researchers in the claim that sexuality is 'almost entirely learned and culturally influenced.'<sup>40</sup> As Dworkin says, 'pornography exists because men despise women, and men despise women in part because pornography

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<sup>39</sup> This problem will return in chapter four, through which I discuss post-feminism embracing of the displayed female body, and sexuality more generally, as a site of empowerment– regardless of whether its consequences are empowering, or, in fact, misogynist.

<sup>40</sup> Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, p. 46.

exists.<sup>41</sup> In Russell's 'Survivors of Pornography,' Rev. Susan Wilhelm writes, 'we, the victims of pornography, are paying with our lives,' as she testifies to her sexual abuse by her husband, contending, 'he got his ideas from the pornography.'<sup>42</sup>

The claim that pornography is responsible for sexist and violent behavior towards women is certainly debatable. This assertion gives pornography weighty omnipotence over the actions of men. If men are already inherently violent against women, as suggested, do they really need pornography to fuel their aggression? And if this aggression is 'culturally influenced', why focus on pornography and not other forms of sexism in mass media? Russell plausibly argues that her choice to focus on pornography stems from the lack of female scholarship on the subject.<sup>43</sup>

On the other hand, given the immense visual overload of sexist images, particularly in contemporary culture, whereby advertisements, television and the Internet clearly have a massive impact on youth culture, this claim absolutely bears weight. I do support this line of inquiry, particularly in a contemporary context. However, my particular grievance is with the way this argument has been put forward. The focus on narratives of victimization to illustrate this problem returns us to a rationale of victimology that reduces a complex systematic and ideological problem to an oversimplified relationship between abused and abuser. Furthermore, the portrayal of pornography as causing further victimization of women essentially reinstates women's supposed place *as always-already a potential victim*. Rather than liberation, many of anti-porn's positions inadvertently lead us back to oppression. The sweeping association of second-wave feminism with victimization, then, as evidenced by the writing of Ferriss

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>42</sup> Rev. Susan Wilhelm, 'Testimony on Pornography and Marital Brutality', in *Making Violence Sexy*, ed. by Russell, 1993, pp. 46-7 (p. 46).

<sup>43</sup> Diana Russell, 'Introduction', in *Making Violence Sexy*, ed. by Russell, 1993, pp. 1-20 (p. 17).

and Young,<sup>44</sup> is, at least in part, due to anti-porn's deployment of victim narratives to expose the violence of pornography. The portrayal of feminism as victimizing in dominant culture is the legacy of these particular strategies, regardless of anti-porn's more liberating intentions.

While the problem of presenting a victim is often an uncritical move, I ask if Dworkin or Russell leaves room for the possibility of a displayed female body that is not a victim. Within this strand of anti-porn feminism, is it possible for a woman to display her body and access agency? An analysis of various definitions of pornography laid out by Dworkin and Russell might lead to clearer insight.

Russell defines pornography as 'material that combines sex and/or exposure of genitals with abuse or degradation in a manner that appears to endorse, condone, or encourage such behavior.'<sup>45</sup> This definition, she continues, includes any sexist or racist material, such as the consistent portrayal of men in the dominant role, the display of women's genitals but not men's, or representations of women limited entirely to 'white men's narrow concept of beauty, that is, very thin, large breasted, blonde women.'<sup>46</sup> Russell makes note of the fact that her definition avoids the term 'sexually explicit,' because, she asserts, she couldn't adequately define the term. In this way, she claims to depart from one of the definitions outlined by Dworkin, which posits pornography as 'the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures and/or words.'<sup>47</sup> By replacing 'sexually explicit' with 'sex and/or exposure of genitals,' Russell implies that pornography doesn't even have to be 'sexual', as long there is an abusive, sexist or racist 'exposure of genitals.'

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<sup>44</sup> Ferriss and Young, 'Chicks, Girls, and Choice: Redefining Feminism,' as discussed on p 105.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

Russell's definition of erotica, however, involves 'sexually suggestive or arousing material.'<sup>48</sup> There is a rift in Russell's rationale: erotica involves sexual or arousing material, but pornography can involve simply the exposure of genitals. She doesn't note whether that exposure is sexual, arousing, or neither. Does Russell assume, then, that the 'exposure of genitals' is inherently sexual or arousing? If so, she might not have deliberately excluded the term 'sexually explicit' from her definitions. If not, her definition of erotica would have included the term 'exposure' in a way that distinguishes it from the 'sexual or arousing material.' This breach in Russell's definitions brings us to a consequential dilemma: is physical display always interpreted as sexual? If so, we are left with a worrying conflation rendering all modes of nudity 'sexual,' whether it be a sex scene in a porn film, Marina Abramović's *Rhythm O*, or the Guerrilla Girls' politicizing posters.

Russell's definition of erotica continues, explaining that this material is 'free of sexism, racism, and homophobia, and respectful of all human beings and animals portrayed.'<sup>49</sup> Within Russell's definitions, then, there is an avenue through which a body can be displayed without involving or contributing to degradation or violence: it must be respectful and free of hateful '-isms'. But if racism can be understood through her example of the consistent portrayal of white, skinny, blonde women, and if the combination of genital exposure and racism is pornography, i.e. violence against women, then is a photograph of a white, skinny, blonde woman's genitals unequivocally degrading to women? Does that mean that a woman who does not fulfill normative standards of beauty can photograph her genitals without degrading herself? Does a woman have to defy normative standards of beauty to display herself without losing her agency? If so, many important artists' work loses credibility, such as Hannah Wilke's

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 3.



photographic pieces like *So Help me Hannah*, potentially any of Annie Sprinkle's work (although her body is arguably 'excessive', and potentially not 'normative'), or the films of Carolee Schneemann like *Fuses*, all of which function to enact a critical agency through their strategic deployment of the female body.

Dworkin, on the other hand, forecloses attempts by Russell and others to delineate between pornography and erotica, defining erotica as 'simply high-class pornography',<sup>50</sup> which still functions within male structures of desire. Erotica is a 'subcategory of pornography',<sup>51</sup> and therefore, degrading. For Dworkin, then, there is no manifestation of 'sexual explicitness' that does not degrade women. Furthermore, there is no clear answer as to whether a physically displayed body is automatically cast as 'sexual explicit' and therefore degrading, or whether there is an avenue for a displayed body that excludes degradation (and therefore 'sexual explicitness'). If that avenue exists for her, she does not clue us in to it.

Other feminists have problematized Dworkin's conflation of display and degradation. Lisa Duggan, for example, writes, 'we need to carefully separate the question of sexual explicitness from the question of misogyny and the question of violence'.<sup>52</sup> In an essay on the problems of the Minneapolis and Indianapolis ordinances drawn up by Dworkin and MacKinnon to ban pornography, Duggan, Nan Hunter, and Carole S. Vance unpick the terms of the proposed law. The definition included in the Minneapolis ordinance of pornography is 'the sexually explicit subordination of women,

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<sup>50</sup> Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, p. 10.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>52</sup> Lisa Duggan, 'Feminist Historians and Antipornography Campaigns: An Overview', in *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture*, ed. by Lisa Duggan and Nan Hunter, 10<sup>th</sup> edn. (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), pp. 65-69, (p. 69).

graphically depicted, whether in pictures or words,<sup>53</sup> and the targets given by supporters of the legislation are sexism, sexual explicitness, and violence. But as Duggan, et al. explain, in order to fall under the legislation, the material must be within the given definition of pornography and meet one of nine criteria— only four of which, they explain, contain a combination of sexism, sexual explicitness and violence.

One clause, for example, regards material that includes women ‘in postures of sexual submission or sexual servility,’ or another regarding women ‘being penetrated by objects or animals.’<sup>54</sup> Duggan et al. argue that these two examples, while sexually explicit, do not contain violence against women.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, they write, these examples ‘are not obviously sexist unless one believes that penetration – whether heterosexual, lesbian, or autoerotic masturbation – is indicative of gender inequality and female oppression.’<sup>56</sup> MacKinnon posed similar difficulties in her use of the film *Deep Throat* (1972) as an example of what would be covered by the proposed ordinance. She states in her brief that the film ‘subordinates women by using women [...] sexually, specifically as eager servicing receptacles for male genitalia and ejaculate.’<sup>57</sup> The brief from the City of Indianapolis continues, writing, ‘a woman is being shown as being ever eager for oral penetration by a series of men’s penises, often on her hands and knees. There are repeated scenes in which her genitalia are graphically displayed and she is shown as enjoying men ejaculating on her face.’<sup>58</sup> Duggan et al. problematize these

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<sup>53</sup> Lisa Duggan, Nan D. Hunter and Carole S. Vance, ‘False Promises: Feminist Antipornography Legislation’, in *Sex Wars*, ed. by Duggan and Hunter, 2006, pp. 43-64, (p. 46).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>55</sup> Although the second example certainly involves violence again (non-consenting) animals.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

descriptions as the rationale for banning the film because these descriptions suggest that 'multiple partners, group sex, and oral sex [...] are sexist.'<sup>59</sup> The language used in these descriptions, furthermore, imply that the woman would not participate in these acts of her own will, when it states, for example, that the woman is sexually 'used.' The fact that Linda Lovelace, the star of the film, later revealed that she was indeed forced to participate should be taken into consideration, but these particular clauses refer to the content rather than what was evidently a violent and exploitative production process.<sup>60</sup> These clauses, however, foreclose the possibility that a woman can be willfully promiscuous, which would be a potential manifestation of agency (even though it may not have been the case with Lovelace.) Like Russell's definition of pornography, in which portraying men in the dominant position is deemed inherently sexist, Dworkin and MacKinnon's terms make sweeping assumptions, essentially lumping together violence, sex, display, and misogyny as interchangeable and indistinct concepts.

The danger, however, in conflating these different forms of exploitation and placing them at the site of the displayed female body is that it renders that body itself problematic, potentially leading to its own demonization and censorship. This remains a significant issue in contemporary portrayals of the female body, and we find a source for that conflation here. As Duggan, et al. explore, the difficulty of interpreting Dworkin and MacKinnon's terms and the multiplicity of their interpretations pose a censorial danger to images of the female body. Duggan, et al. explain that the passage of the Minneapolis law was due, in large, part, to support from right-wing groups who saw the bill as achieving a ban on sexually explicit materials, despite their probable disregard for or

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>60</sup> Gloria Steinem, 'The Real Linda Lovelace', in *Making Violence Sexy*, ed. by Russell, 1993, pp. 23-31.

active opposition to feminism.<sup>61</sup> The supporters included 'anti-pornography feminists, neighborhood groups concerned about the effects of porn shops on residential areas, and conservatives opposed to the availability of sexually explicit materials for "moral" reasons.'<sup>62</sup> That these ordinances were perceived to be censorial, and supported because they enacted a prohibition on explicit materials, very clearly points to the censorship of representations of the body – specifically, of the displayed female body – that would come from such a law.

This potential censorship, then, indicates the displayed female body as part of the problem. Dworkin and MacKinnon's conflation of terms – sex with violence, 'explicitness' with misogyny – renders the displayed body a culprit. As Duggan, et al, write, 'thus, "sexually explicit" becomes identified and equated with "violent."'<sup>63</sup> If the degradation of women portrayed in pornography generates further degradation of women outside of pornography, as these anti-porn feminists argue, and if pornography involves the 'explicit' display of the female body, that female body becomes a corroborator. The displayed female body is implicated not only as a victim, but also as a contributor, via participation, to violence against other women. The displayed female body in pornography, then, through her association with violence and misogyny, renders her not just a victim, but also an auxiliary to pornography's criminality – she is not just a victim, but also a victimizer.

Though Russell, Dworkin and MacKinnon define their case as objecting to the degradation and violence against women, and distinctly *not* against obscenity,<sup>64</sup> their terms leave little room for the portrayal of an explicit body that is not posited as a victim

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<sup>61</sup> Duggan, Hunter and Vance, 'False Promises', p. 44.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>64</sup> Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possession Women*, p. 9, and Russell, 'Introduction', p. 4.

of female degradation or that doesn't contribute to misogyny. That the definitions and terms used to condemn pornography are messily and unmistakably intertwined leaves the displayed female body victim to, and criminal cause for, the prohibitions against her degradation. The displayed body of this second-wave anti-porn feminist faction is easily perceived as a victim: a body without access to her potential agency who reinstates her victimhood by participating in her own oppression.

## **Backlash**

The most problematic contemporary assumptions around feminism, particularly for young people, come precisely from Dworkin's strand of feminism. The difficulty in untangling Dworkin's configuration of the female body from its victimization, and her radical notions regarding male desire and the violence of sex has led to the misguided notion that feminism is 'man-hating,' 'anti-sex,' and is victimizing to women. These beliefs pervade mainstream perceptions of feminism, and lay the groundwork for its rejection.

In *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (1993), Susan Faludi significantly describes the conditions of this rejection. She argues that while the notion that women have achieved equality is being advertised and sold pervasively within mainstream culture, the notion that women are also miserable because of that newfound independence is being widely distributed alongside it. 'Women', she writes, are being represented as 'unhappy precisely *because they are free*.'<sup>65</sup> Feminism, she argues, is blamed for women's misery. The figure of the career-focused single woman, depressed and lonely, whose true desire is to get married and have babies, pervades dominant

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<sup>65</sup> Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 2.

culture.<sup>66</sup> Feminism, it seems, is at fault for the lonely, single life, in part because of its perceived frigidity towards men and prioritizing of sexual freedom over family.<sup>67</sup> Faludi goes on to meticulously outline the multitudinous ways in which women have *not* achieved equality – in wages, in politics, in education, even at home.<sup>68</sup>

This backlash, I claim, in line with Angela McRobbie, is a result of the demonization of feminism, making it ‘unpalatable to younger women’.<sup>69</sup> As McRobbie argues, feminism is vilified and made to seem irrelevant in contemporary culture. This stigmatized version of feminism, she writes, ‘is a truncated and sclerotic anti-male and censorious version of a movement which was much more diverse and open-minded.’<sup>70</sup> Feminism has been reduced from its wide-reaching aims, accomplishments, and politics, to a man-hating ideology, she argues, and her use of the term ‘censorious’ potentially indicates the way in which feminism is seen as both hypercritical and prude.

In a performance I am developing, provisionally entitled *The Famous in the Streets*, I, as The Famous, interview a number of young people in the streets of London about feminism. Interestingly, much of my documentation proves my and McRobbie’s claims. Many people were reluctant when I brought up the term ‘feminism’ and often associated it with negativity or ‘man-hating.’ When asked whether she was a feminist, Julia, a young woman in the restaurant business, struggled to respond. She then asked me, ‘what do you mean by feminism?’ I responded, ‘what do you think I mean?’ She then said, ‘so if you mean a negative perspective, I’m not a feminist.’ I struggled to understand

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., pp. 5-12.

<sup>69</sup> Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change* (London: Sage Publications, 2009), p. 1.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

what the 'negative' perspective of feminism was in Julia's opinion, but her immediate association of feminism with something disagreeable, I believe, is quite telling.

In another interview with a young woman in advertising, Charlotte, we seemed to overcome the man-hating hurdle, perhaps through some persuasion on my end. When asked whether she was a feminist, she, again, struggled to respond, replying, 'I would say I'm not so much a feminist, but umm the thing is, a lot of, ugh, I don't know what the word is...' After assuring her it was not an easy question, she replied, 'some people would be like, "oh you're a feminist" because I am very much quite... umm...' to which I inserted, 'strong and powerful?' She answered, 'yeah, and I like equal rights.' This urged me to question what, then, makes her *not* a feminist, to which she couldn't reply, eventually saying that, indeed, maybe she was a feminist after all. She then responded with, 'well, I believe in equal rights for girls but I also sympathize with men as well. Like, I think men should get paternity leave.' I asked whether that might not also be a feminist issue, to which she said, 'No, but maybe it is.' 'So do you think feminists hate men?' I asked. 'Yes, sometimes,' she replied. 'Do you hate men?' I asked, to which she replied, 'No.' 'So you're a feminist who likes men?' 'I guess so.'

Regardless of my coaxing, it seems that for Julia and Charlotte, feminism is either associated with something unpleasant or with 'man-hating.' In 'Chicks, Girls and Choice: Redefining Feminism,' Ferriss and Young defend the rejection of second-wave feminism precisely on those terms. Second-wave feminism, they write, is associated with victimization, and anti-men and anti-sex sensibilities.<sup>71</sup> The second-wave feminist view of 'sex as a site of oppression and domination,'<sup>72</sup> they contend, leads young women to

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<sup>71</sup> Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, 'Chicks, Girls, and Choice: Redefining Feminism', in *Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue* (June 2006), pp. 87-97 (p. 88).

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

‘rebel against the victim mentality of second-wave feminism,’<sup>73</sup> referring to it as ‘angry feminism,’ and ‘a detriment.’<sup>74</sup> For them, it is a generational divide, whereby young women reject the ‘hectoring, critical tone of second-wave feminism,’ and, instead, choose to celebrate their sexual freedom and access to choice through popular culture, rather than participate in the resentful takedown of patriarchy or ‘direct political action.’<sup>75</sup>

For them, the popular 2001 film *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, based on the novel of the same name by Helen Fielding (1996), is an example of this new feminism, despite the fact that in a quotation they use from the novel, feminism itself is rejected. In their words, ‘Bridget [tries] to stifle her friend’s anti-male ravings’ by saying, “there is nothing so unattractive to a man as strident feminism.”<sup>76</sup> Here, feminism is posited as a turn-off, and is directly associated with ‘anti-male ravings.’ That Ferriss and Young champion this work as feminist because of the way it expresses its frustration with what is perceived as the second-wave’s problems, reveals the contemporary dilemma in which feminism is reduced to narrow interpretations, e.g. ‘anti-male,’ whereby young feminists, including the authors of the article, stand by the source of those interpretations.

Additionally, Ferriss and Young problematically conflate ‘second-wave feminism’ into one, all-encompassing, monolithic definition. Evidently, the most difficult notions emerging from a small faction of the anti-porn movement have been appropriated and re-circulated as representative of second-wave feminism itself. By equating the anti-porn feminists, and one particular offshoot specifically, with all of feminism, feminism has been given a bad reputation, making it easy for young people to dismiss it and accuse it of being anachronistic. This problematically discounts every other kind of feminism that

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 88.



has occurred since then, or even before or during its time. In this slapdash appropriation the more useful contributions of second-wave feminism are forgotten within mainstream culture, abandoned to historical dissolution. The exposure of pornography as a context for grave misogyny and the widespread objectification and fetishization of women throughout mainstream culture, however, played a crucial role in addressing and counteracting the oppression of women in the 1970s, alongside the numerous social and legal wars fought by that generation, providing ours with better pay, better representation, and more control over our own bodies.

The conflation of display and violence remains hugely problematic, however, and it is not only sustained by the conservatively-minded or advocate of censorship. A recent event at The Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art made evident the ways in which physical display and victimization have remained in a tangled relationship, whereby the displayed female body is inadvertently condemned and persistently rendered a site of exploitation.

### **Marina Abramović, Vanessa Beecroft, and The Knot of Exploitation**

The annual fundraising gala of Los Angeles' Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in 2011 was an event that spurred vibrant debate around exploitation in the art and performance world. Marina Abramović's artistic direction of the evening involved silent and composed performers appearing as centerpieces at the dining tables, either as rotating heads with the performers' bodies concealed under the table on spinning 'lazy Susans,' or lying nude under a skeleton atop the table (a replication of Abramović's own performance, *Nude with Skeleton* [2002]). The attendees, comprised of celebrities,

patrons, and wealthy donors, were required to wear white lab coats, and confronted by the presence of a nude body or a pair of staring eyes as they dined.<sup>77</sup>



Figure 7: Table at MOCA LA Gala with performance of *Nude with Skeleton*, directed by Marina Abramović, 2011

Abramović and MOCA's then-director, Jeffrey Deitch, quickly came under critical scrutiny. The small fee awarded to the performers – \$150 for 15 hours of rehearsal plus three hours of performance – by such a well-funded art institution for its money-soliciting gala, was rapidly swept into a debate over performers' rights regarding compensation and working conditions.<sup>78</sup> The majority of the published criticism of the event did not concern

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<sup>77</sup> Susan Michals, 'Naked as they Came: Eating with Nudes at Marina Abramović's LA MOCA Gala Performance', *New York Observer*, 13 November 2011

<http://www.galleristny.com/2011/11/naked-as-they-came-eating-with-nudes-at-marina-abramovic-la-moca-gala-performance/> [accessed 25 November 2011].

<sup>78</sup> Claudia La Rocco, 'Yvonne Rainer Blasts Marina Abramović and MOCA LA', *The Performance*

the artistic merits of Abramović's performance but, rather, conflates various forms of exploitation – principally economic and physical – implicating the displayed female body as an unmistakable site of exploitation in its wake. I argue that while this event was economically exploitative for the performers in material terms, the assumption that it was also physically exploitative needs to be interrogated. I analyze the two most circulated critiques of the event – the first by Sarah Wookey, an auditionee, and the second by the influential choreographer and dance-artist Yvonne Rainer – with the object of disarticulating the conflation of forms of exploitation within their arguments.

The outcry was initiated by Wookey's 'Open Letter to Artists', published originally on *The Performance Club* (an online blog). In her letter, she asserts a call to artists to organize around fair compensation and performers' rights, and calls attention to the disparity between the performers' meager fees and the gala's unquestionable aim to procure generous donations. She writes:

The time has come for artists in Los Angeles and elsewhere to unite, organize, and work toward changing the degenerate discrepancies between the wealthy and powerful funders of art and the artists, mainly poor, who are at its service and are expected to provide so-called avant-garde, prescient content or 'entertainment,' as is increasingly the case – what is nonetheless merchandise in the service of money.<sup>79</sup>

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*Club* [blog], 11 November 2011 <<http://theperformanceclub.org/2011/11/yvonne-rainer-douglas-crimp-and-taisha-paggett-blast-marina-Abramović-and-moca-la/>> [accessed 25 November 2011].

<sup>79</sup> Sarah Wookey, 'Open Letter to Artists', *The Performance Club* [blog], 23 November 2011 <<http://theperformanceclub.org/2011/11/open-letter-to-artists/>> [accessed 25 November 2011].

Wookey's claims regarding the financial discrepancies are rather poignant, and her call to organize around, as she writes, 'equal pay for artists, especially dancers, who tend to be some of the lowest paid artists' is a significant and timely appeal.<sup>80</sup>

Wookey's letter continues 'in response to ethics' and repeatedly references working conditions and labor rights as the site of those ethical concerns. One condition she lists is the potential for harassment, as the performers are not allowed to react to the audience members or their actions. Wookey writes, 'during the audition, there was no mention of safeguards, signs, or signals for performers in distress, and when I asked about what protection would be provided I was told it could not be guaranteed.'<sup>81</sup> While this is a clear claim to problematic working conditions, another artist, Carrie McLlwin [sic], who participated in the event, contended Wookey's protestation. She writes, 'they were prepared to intervene and stop any abuses of the performers, were it to occur [...] [I] believed I would be protected by these women who I felt to be peers and professionals.'<sup>82</sup> This performer also gives us evidence that at least two performers were replaced during the performance, including one after indicating her discomfort. Though this certainly is not evidence that would or should discredit Wookey's prior concerns, and her concern should be taken seriously, her other grievances point us to further concerns about the body.

Other working conditions Wookey lists as problematic are the main *physical* components of the work: remaining nude and silent without the option of responding

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Carrie McLlwin, 'Disembodied: A Personal Account of Marina Abramović's Performance for the 2011 MOCA Gala', *Notes on Looking* [blog], 19 November 2011

<<http://notesonlooking.com/2011/11/9236/>> [accessed 8 January 2013].

outwardly to the audience apart from eye-contact, for three consecutive hours.<sup>83</sup> Wookey, here, has called into question some of the most ubiquitous physical practices in the practice of performance: nudity, silence, eye contact, and duration prevail in the world of performance art, particularly in Abramović's work. Her 1977 piece *Imponderabilia*, in which she and her partner Ulay stood nude facing each other inside a doorway forcing the Museum-goers to pass between them, and *Luminosity* (1997), in which Abramović sat nude on a bicycle seat suspended in the center of a wall for two hours, were both re-performed by other people at the then-recent 2010 retrospective exhibition *The Artist is Present* at The Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA) along with many other works, including *Nude with Skeleton*.<sup>84</sup> Noting in the letter that she has followed Abramović's work for many years, Wookey would presumably know that there was a possibility that these conditions might be present. If this were the case, why would Wookey doubt the ethics of this mode of performance?

I do not seek to discredit Wookey's feelings: her fear of physical harassment and relative unsafety is certainly legitimate, and I strongly support her call for fair pay. However, I can't help but link her anxieties to the combined presence of physically displayed female bodies, the economically exploitative circumstances, and the element of leisure or pleasure enjoyed by the attendees on the behalf of the displayed bodies. What Wookey seems to find problematic here is the exchange of art for money, whereby art is debased into 'entertainment' or 'merchandise', and the participation of women within the situation – indicating the problematic 'rhetoric of prostitution', as Doyle writes, that hangs over both the displayed female body and art's association with money, which I

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<sup>83</sup> Wookey, 'Open Letter to Artists'.

<sup>84</sup> 'MoMA Announces First U.S. Retrospective of Marina Abramović's Work', *Art Daily* <<http://artdaily.com/news/33601/MoMA-Announces-First-U-S--Retrospective-of-Marina-Abramovic--s-Work#.VgWfjI9Viko>> [accessed 4 September 2015].

will return to in more depth towards the end of this chapter.<sup>85</sup> This messy relationship, I argue, allows for a conflation, in which the displayed female body is seen to be exploited physically, when, in fact, the central issue is the way in which this large, well-funded institution has financially taken advantage of young and eager artists.

I will expand on this point by examining the Toxic Titties' infiltration of Vanessa Beecroft's *VB46*, where a similar dilemma is at play, and I will subsequently return to a discussion on Abramović's direction of the gala. Toxic Titties was a collaborative group of artists in Los Angeles, made up of MFA students at CalArts. Upon seeing an audition notice for Beecroft's *VB46* at CalArts, two members of the group decided to audition in order to infiltrate and sabotage the piece. Beecroft's work typically involves a number of models standing in formation in a gallery, silent and unresponsive to the audience for a set duration. In some cases she has used men, as in *VB39* (1999) in which her models were members of the US Navy, and in *VB42*, involving the US Silent Service, but she most often uses female models or women with model-like figures. In the case of *VB46*, the cast of all women were nude apart from a pair of Allesandro Dell-Acqua stilettos, and were required to remain stationary for three hours, with the option of sitting or lying down if they grew tired of standing.

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<sup>85</sup> Jennifer Doyle, *Sex Objects: Art and The Dialectics of Desire* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 51.



Figure 8: Heather Cassils of Toxic Titties (center front) in VB46, Vanessa Beecroft, 2002

The Toxic Titties' infiltration developed from a plan to actively subvert and disrupt the performance by one of them dropping an egg from her vagina onto the Gagosian floor (the plan was abandoned), to the more unobtrusive strategy of participating in the piece and then writing about the process in order to expose its exploitative conditions.<sup>86</sup> Though perhaps a less spectacular move, their article cogently reveals the work's particularly degrading process, as they were waxed, bleached, stuffed in ill-fitting shoes, and worked over-time. However, these performers/models were paid \$1,500 for two days of video and photo shoots, a three-hour performance, and agreeing to have their head-hair bleached and their bikini area waxed – ten times more than what Abramović's performers were paid for a similar number of hours, although with certainly more personal requirements. Evidently, these performers were not being economically exploited in quite the same way, but their working conditions were considerably more problematic.

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<sup>86</sup> Julia Steinmetz, Heather Cassils and Clover Leary, 'Behind Enemy Lines: Toxic Titties Infiltrate Vanessa Beecroft', *Signs*, 31,3 (2006), 753-83 (p. 761).

The Toxic Titties' major protestations were about conditions involved in the process itself. Firstly, there was a lack of transparency regarding what was expected of them. For example, one of the members, Clover Leary, describes the shock of discovering her entire genital area was to be waxed, a discovery made only as it was occurring. Furthermore, their hours were increased without prior notice or consent, for which Heather Cassils demanded over-time pay on behalf of the models. They were indeed paid overtime – their original fee nearly doubled to £2,900.<sup>87</sup>

However, the Toxic Titties' primary grievance was the overwhelming feeling of degradation. They describe, 'not unlike sorority hazing rituals or military training, the production process of *VB46* seemed designed to strip these women of their individuality, break down their defenses, and instill a disciplined group ethic.'<sup>88</sup> This feeling is echoed in other statements. For example, as one of them is being painted, she describes, 'this is what a sheep must feel like when it is separated from the herd and shorn.'<sup>89</sup> Or, later on, she hears the 'whirling click of a trigger being pulled. I am being shot. Someone is sneakily documenting.'<sup>90</sup>

What these loaded comparisons signal, though, is the central question Beecroft's work provokes. Beecroft's work is, at its best, a critique of the objectifying power of the gaze and the homogenizing power of capitalist-based structures of commodity-desire around the female body. That Cassils and Leary felt like 'a sheep being shorn,' like another in the line of cattle awaiting its fate, is, arguably, exactly what Beecroft's work attempts to critique by re-presenting it. In *VB46*, the women are displayed in a way that invites fetishization – there are culturally coded signals to key us into their fetishization –

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 763.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 762.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 757.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 761.



the high heels, the smoothly waxed genitals – these are clear references to a culturally coded, recognizable image of the fetishized female body as represented in magazines such as *Vogue*. Beecroft is, arguably, keying the audience in to the problem of fetishization. But whether Beecroft critiques that process or simply re-enacts it has been of critical debate. By re-presenting it, she quite possibly reinstates the problem, rather than critiquing it. As Jennifer Doyle writes, ‘her work finalizes the corporate marriage of art and fashion, and renders visible the libidinal dynamics of art consumption: gorgeous bodies served up to paying customers under the guise of aesthetic contemplation and enjoyment.’<sup>91</sup> Doyle continues to explain that Beecroft’s work ‘adopts the pose of a critique of the objectification of women in art, but the power of that critique is all but completely dismantled by the institution which mounts it.’<sup>92</sup> For Doyle, and I agree, Beecroft’s performances are complicit with the economies of value, particularly around the displayed female body, that occur within the context of the art market and the galleries in which they take place.<sup>93</sup> And it is precisely this ‘corporate marriage’, I argue, – not just between art and fashion, but between art and the institution – which produces the debate around Abramović’s gala direction as well.

Beecroft herself hints at the exploitative quality of the situation, and her awareness of it, when she admits to ‘feeling guilty’ as her reason for not coming into contact with the models.<sup>94</sup> Additionally, Beecroft is clearly interested in presenting the work as a shiny, fetishized image, rather than in its critical potential. As Steinmetz

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<sup>91</sup> Jennifer Doyle, ‘The Trouble with Men, or Sex, Boredom, and the Work of Vaginal Davis’, in *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, ed. by Gavin Butt (Malden, Oxford, and Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 81-100 (p. 83).

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 760.

observes, in the performance, the punctum of the work was, perhaps, the broken straps on Cassils' stilettos, (presumably from everyone being given the same size shoe), the sweat running down Cassils' body from standing for so long, and 'her bodybuilder's muscles.'<sup>95</sup> These are the points that puncture the image, pointing to the difficulty of presenting a highly fetishized image of women, rupturing the possibility of its triumph. But in a photograph of Cassils widely circulated and even printed in Beecroft's monograph, those accidents were painted over and fixed. Cassils' body had been 'neutered through digital manipulation' and 'smoothed out to conform to a more feminine ideal,' the shoe straps fixed and the sweat erased.<sup>96</sup> Beecroft's decision to Photoshop the 'unfeminine' elements, reforming them to fit an idealized, fetishized image of a woman, undoes the critical edge this work might have allowed for. Beecroft's failure to critique the fetishizing of bodies in this and other cultural situations merely repeats the degrading process that otherwise might have been called into question.

Like Beecroft's piece, Abramović's gala piece might sit ambiguously between critique and the failure to do so. A generous reading of the event might suggest that it critiques the position of these bodies as fetishized objects. The nudes with skeletons lay on dining tables while people eat, suggesting, perhaps, the metaphor of woman-as-consumable. However, a rather transparent symbol of death lies on top of them, creating an image, which, at most, potentially enacts a de-fetishization, as it brings the woman-as-consumable metaphor to its end, undoing the power of that metaphor by reaching beyond its appeal and into the abject – that is, to death. Furthermore, the other women stare down the diners – concealed under the table and exposed through a hole in its centre, they are reduced to a head, not a body – quite distinct from typical fetishization which often removes the woman's face or head from the image.

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 775.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 775.

This analysis, however, might imbue the work with more critical power than it actually possesses; for, on the other hand, one could easily argue that rather than critique the problem of female fetishization, Abramović reproduces it. By placing these bodies on display and in association with the notion of consumption, isn't she merely simulating the culturally coded metaphor of woman-as-consumable? Furthermore, if, indeed, these images are meant to critique, they seem rather weak – for example, I can't imagine *Nude with Skeleton* rendering such a feeling of abjection in the diners that they would be put off their food, and based on photographic documentation of the event, the eyes staring back at the diners were easily avoided and rendered rather insignificant by the excitement of the food and conversation.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Guy Trebay, 'A Career Provocateur', *New York Times*, 18 November 2011

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/20/fashion/marina-Abramovic-s-crossover-moment.html>

[accessed 4 August 2015]; Alesandra Dubin, 'At MOCA Gala, Artist Marina Abramović Has Live Centerpieces Stare Down Dinner Guests', *BizBash* <http://www.bizbash.com/750-guests-came-museum-contemporary-art-los-angeles-gala/gallery/81500#.VgW-wl9Viko> [accessed 4 August 2015].



Figure 9: Pamela Anderson dining at table with *Nude with Skeleton* at MOCA gala, 2011

While I do find the critical ambiguity of Beecroft's work and Abramović's gala direction compelling, because of the way it generates exciting debate, I do not particularly think either work *succeeds* at self-critique. Regardless, however, the position of the performer's bodies needs to be considered in more depth.

Yvonne Rainer responded to Wookey's indignation by writing a letter to MOCA's then-Director Jeffrey Deitch. Her letter voices her own concerns around economic disparities, the struggle of art and its place in the institution, the relationship between performer and employer, as well as questions around the displayed female body and its exploitation. The letter is littered with words and phrases that imply that the performers' condition of being on display renders them exploited. She writes: Abramović is 'subjecting her performers to public humiliation'; what the performers are doing is 'titillation' for the donors; 'the performers, [...] though willing, will be exploited nonetheless'; the performers 'become decorative table ornaments'; the performers will

'be *required* to display their nude bodies'; the event is a 'degrading' and 'grotesque spectacle'.<sup>98</sup> That Rainer refers to their 'nude bodies' as 'subjected,' 'exploited' and 'required' indicates that she feels the performers physical display *is* the form of their exploitation; that she refers to them as 'decorative ornaments' there to 'titillate' the audience indicates that she views the performance as one intended to stimulate pleasure in the audience. That she remarkably mentions the problem of underpayment only once much later in the letter suggests that a large part of Rainer's objections to the piece refer not to economic exploitation, but to the assumed *sexual* exploitation of the displayed bodies and the assumed pleasure to be reaped from their presence. Indeed, in a rather low blow, Rainer describes Abramović's choices as:

reminiscent of *Salò*, Pasolini's controversial film of 1975 that dealt with sadism and sexual abuse of a group of adolescents at the hands of a bunch of post-war fascists. Reluctant as I am to dignify Abramović by mentioning Pasolini in the same breath, the latter at least had a socially credible justification tied to the cause of anti-fascism.<sup>99</sup>

Rainer's sucker punch is teeming with accusations – that Abramović's placement of her work on other, younger performers is a form of authoritarianism; that the 'requirement' of nudity is a form of abuse; and that Abramović lacks a credible purpose – all of which places Abramović in a position of oblivious subjugator and her performers, naïve victims. She reduces the performers further, when she writes, 'their desperate voluntarism says something about the generally exploitative conditions of the art world

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<sup>98</sup> La Rocco, 'Yvonne Rainer Blasts Marina Abramović and MOCA LA'.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

such that people are willing to become decorative table ornaments installed by a celebrity artist in the hopes of somehow breaking into the show biz themselves.<sup>100</sup>

While the delivery of this thought is rather severe, and relentlessly condemns the performers as well as Abramović, it does bring up a useful point, which is duplicated by the Toxic Titties' statement that 'Beecroft uses her status in the art world in order to wield power over other women.'<sup>101</sup> As they articulately observe,

Beecroft places the bodies of *other* women in positions potentially exploitative and demeaning rather than using her own body as a ground for experimentation. Much of the power of 1970s body art and contemporary female artists' construction and presentation of their bodies as already sexualized resides in the simultaneous presence of the artist as subject and object. Even as we are viewing the artist's body as sexual object, we are conscious of her status as the author of her own image, her control and authority over her own body, and her embodied subjectivity.<sup>102</sup>

Interestingly, the Toxic Titties deploy one of Abramović's early pieces, *Rhythm 0*, as a foil to Beecroft, in which Abramović stood naked in a gallery for six hours in 1974 next to a table with 72 objects, ranging from a feather to a gun and accompanying bullets, with a sign inviting the audience to use those objects on her body as they desired. Here, Abramović is both subject and object, enacting and exposing the inherent violence of objectification of the female body. By placing the work on her own body, she exposes a

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Steinmetz, Cassils and Leary, 'Behind Enemy Lines: Toxic Titties Infiltrate Vanessa Beecroft', p. 767.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 767.

problem, rather than reinstating it.<sup>103</sup> However, as Rainer points out, in the MOCA event, much like Beecroft's work, Abramović has placed her work on other bodies, whereby she remains the author/agent/subject, at a safe remove from the action, and the performers are reduced to passive objects.

The last course of the evening emphasizes the problematically ambivalent effects of Abramović's piece when two life-size cakes were brought out: one in the form of Abramović's naked body, and the other of Deborah Harry's, who also performed that night. In the *New York Times*, a journalist wrote,

When 'Marina' and 'Deborah' were being cut up into slices so that the well-heeled guests could indulge in the visually absurd bacchanal of devouring the artists' various body parts, one couldn't help but read a powerful, and funny, metaphor into what was happening, one that Abramović was no doubt perfectly in on.<sup>104</sup>

Though the journalist sees this as a moment of self-critique, the cakes were received by some as an anti-feminist signal, as protesters appeared yelling 'Violence Against Women!' when Harry 'plunged [...] a large knife [...] into her very own likeness.'<sup>105</sup>

The cake is indeed an image of the artist's own body, which may fulfil what the Toxic Titties call for. But it is not her body – it is a representation. This is just cake. It is pleasant, sort of funny, slightly abject, but not really. It doesn't approach the risk and

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 766.

<sup>104</sup> Felix Burrichter, 'Naked Ambition: Marina Abramović's Museum Gala', *Times Magazine* [online], 15 November 2011 <<http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/15/naked-ambition-marina-Abramovic-s-moca-gala/>> [accessed 25 November 2011].

<sup>105</sup> Michals, 'Naked as They Came: Eating with Nudes at Marina Abramović's LA MOCA Gala Performance'.

potency of her live body in her performances of the 1970s, including *Rhythm 0*. It may be an acknowledgment of that possibility – it sparks that thought in our heads – but it doesn't fulfil it. Does the presence of these cakes, then, imply that the other bodies on the tables are physically exploited or are meant to appear that way? Is the cake-body as consumable-for-pleasure, a self-reflexive critical metaphor for the performers? Are the cakes Abramović's attempt to make explicit or transparent the exploitative aspect of this event, by implicating herself as the consumable object, in addition to her performers, or do they admit the problematic disparity of privilege so present in the event? Is it an apology for her complicity? Is this meant to be a critique?

Here, like my reading of the performers' actions, is a critique that falls short. The presence of these cakes reinstates the way I read the other bodies – because I find Abramović's attempt to point out the exploitative situation more of a weak apology than a forthright critique. If the cakes are meant to indicate Abramović's acknowledgement that the performers' position at the table are as consumable commodity, I remain unconvinced by both the content of the performance and the fatuity of the cakes.

Abramović's critical misfire here brings us back to Rainer's critique. For Rainer, as she suggested in reference to Pasolini, a work should have the redeeming quality of being politically engaged. It's clear from Rainer's history as an artist that she does not have a hands-down problem with physical display – she famously performed her renowned dance piece *Trio A* nude with large American flags tied around her and the other dancers' necks in 1970 at Judson Church. This performance, she writes, was:

a protest against the arrest of various people accused of desecrating the American flag, including gallery owner Stephen Radich, who had shown the 'flag-defiling'



work of sculptor Mark Morrel in 1967 and whose case traveled all the way to the Supreme Court.<sup>106</sup>

But for Rainer, this is *political*. Her difficulty with the bodies in Abramović's work is not that they are naked, it seems, but that, rather than in protest, these bodies are participating in and supporting the very same institution that is at fault for their low pay. This thought is made clear by another statement made by Rainer. McIlwain reported in her blogged rebuttal to Wookey and Rainer's letters that Rainer stealthily appeared at one of the rehearsals, as she writes, 'dressed in black to appear as if one of the performers, and without introduction, entered into discussions with individuals, trying to draw parallels between us [and] prostitutes.'<sup>107</sup> The performers, Rainer seems to be implying, are selling themselves, submitting themselves, to the very institution that is exploiting them.

This comment, particularly in relation to Rainer's grievances regarding the exploited position of the performers, who, to recall, she describes as 'degraded' and used as 'titillation' for the entertainment of the donors, evokes Wookey's concern, in which she refers to the performance as 'entertainment' for the wealthy donors, 'merchandise in the service of money.' Because of its position within a financially profitable event, art is reduced to mere 'entertainment.' It is, perhaps, Abramović's recent celebrity status that impels Rainer further towards her reading – Abramović has crossed the border from suffering artist to the most exalted level of privilege – the celebrity. Abramović's decision, then to 'transpose her own powerful work to the bodies of others', as Rainer says, has

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<sup>106</sup> Yvonne Rainer, 'Trio A: Genealogy, Documentation, Notation', *Dance Research Journal*, Volume 41,2 (Winter 2009), 12-18 (p. 13).

<sup>107</sup> McIlwain, 'Disembodied: A Personal Account of Marina Abramović's Performance for the 2011 MOCA Gala'.

ethical 'implications.' Abramović, as celebrity, is part of the system. In collaborating with the institution, she becomes part of the system. And rather than critique it, Abramović submits to it and serves it, and exploits others in the process.

For both Rainer and Wookey, it seems that art's association with money is what underlies their criticism. In this particular event, the relationship between art and money is amplified particularly through the inequality of exchange between the artists' services and their compensation, as well as the exaggeratingly unbalanced disparity between their wages and the profit-wielding celebrity event. While I support this aspect of their claims, what I think is really at stake here for both Rainer and Wookey, as previously mentioned, is the economic relationship between money and art, *whereby the body becomes regarded as the site of this dirty exchange*. The relationship between commodity culture, the female body, and the art world seems to underlie their impassioned claims.

In *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire* (2006), Jennifer Doyle effectively outlines 'the critical habit of using the sexually compromised woman as an allegory for the position of the artist in relation to the market.'<sup>108</sup> Rainer's comparison of the performers to prostitutes crucially cites this historical analogy. These performers have 'sold out,' debasing themselves to exploitative circumstances for a job, she indicates, that might open the door to 'show biz'. As Doyle explains, the figure of the prostitute is used in criticism as shorthand for the relationship between art and the market, whereby 'money's stigma of the abject' becomes entangled in the exchange.<sup>109</sup>

Doyle argues that when art shifted from its dependency on patron-based commissions to market-based sales, artists had to acclimatize to the market, and it was during this historical shift that art's 'risk of becoming a kind of sex work' emerged.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Doyle, *Sex Objects*, p. 46.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

There is a value question at play here, whereby artists begin to feel like they are 'forced to attach a price to something that is not supposed to have a price at all.'<sup>111</sup> Like sex in the case of the prostitute, art is seen to have an inherent value, and 'autonomy,' whereby its aesthetic value should be independent of the economic. Prostitution, then, as 'the practice of mixing things that are supposed to be kept separate (sex and money) emerges as the negative ground against which critics might assert the autonomy of art.'<sup>112</sup> For the critic who engages in this 'rhetoric of prostitution,'<sup>113</sup> artists that participate in this market are associated with 'selling out,' 'pandering to a popular audience,' and submitting to the vulgar appeal of mass culture.<sup>114</sup> This artist's work then becomes 'vulgar' itself, 'false,'<sup>115</sup> whereby the critic utilizes her position to adjudicate what art should be and what art should do.<sup>116</sup>

The danger in this kind of critique is that, as Doyle describes, 'any relationship involving an exchange (of looks, of money, of favors) can look like prostitution.'<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, the invocation of the prostitute reduces her (and sometimes him) to a 'dirty,' abject figure, not just because of her engagement in promiscuity but in her tangled relationship with the filth of money. Here, as well, the prostitute is figured as 'passive', uncritically engaging with sex, and bearing no agency over her choice of partners. It is figured as a submission, and in the case of art, it is figured as a submission or 'surrender' to a system, to mass culture, to which art is supposed to remain both distinct and

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

critical.<sup>118</sup> However, Rainer's implicit comparison of the performers to prostitutes implicates the ethics of prostitution in an uncritical way, as Doyle's argument suggests. Her reading of the relationship between the displayed body and economic exchange in performance and its analogous sister in prostitution renders the performer/prostitute both perverse and powerless. The performers are configured as victims to an exploitative system, and 'dirty' enough to accept such a tarnished exchange. But what happens to consent, pleasure, agency, when the performer/prostitute is reduced to an exploited victim? Because the performers were not creators of the work, do they have no connection to their own will or creative faculties? Or is their access to choice pre-determined by the state of the art-world, so heavily dependent on capitalist structures of exchange and exploitation?

What makes it difficult to unbind this conceptual knot is the fact that the displayed female body *is* a commodity that has commercial, and therefore, monetary value. The displayed female body is already associated with economic exchange in the commodity-based capitalist system that thrives on the commodification and fetishization of female bodies. This particular event and its surrounding gossip bring up a vital question about how we might read that body. But these displayed bodies are read by Rainer and others as exploited without distinguishing what is really at stake in the exchange. *The female body on display is not inherently exploited, nor are all forms of exchange a degradation.* While I do not find Beecroft's work or Abramović's gala direction critical, and I believe they both certainly involve exploitative circumstances of either pay or working conditions, the displayed female body cannot be implicitly read as the site of that exploitation. Furthermore, regardless of whether one reads the performers as physically exploited, what's more significant is the way in which the criticism of the event seems to entangle those bodies with inevitable victimization and exploitation via

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

their relationship to the money-orientated, institution-based, event. What this analysis reveals is not that the female bodies displayed in the work resist exploitation, but that these displayed bodies are not physically exploited via an intrinsic and categorical mutuality. These bodies' participation in a potentially 'dirty' exchange between art and an institution does not necessarily render these bodies 'dirty' or victimized as well.

The question Rainer's letter raises about what classifies as a critical or political move, and the problematic temptation to read the figure of the prostitute as a victim, underlies my interrogation into the work and criticism of long-established artist Lynn Hershman Leeson in the following chapter, through which I continue to discuss the politics of prostitution and the critical potential of the figure of the whore.

### Chapter Three

#### Cultural Redemption and the Threat of the Whore: Lynn Hershman is Here, There, and Everywhere

Lynn Hershman is a prolific and accomplished artist who has been making work since the mid-1960s across various disciplines: sculpture, film, performance, interactive media, photography, site-specific installation, among others. Throughout the years, her work has explored poignant questions regarding female subjectivity, as she has consistently investigated the potentiality of multiple subjectivities, the blurriness between fact and fiction, the invisibility of the female subject/artist, and the various modes and manifestations of autonomy. In *The Culture of Redemption* (1990), Leo Bersani discusses the problematic tendency to view art as redemptive of the flaws of lived experience.<sup>1</sup> Equally, there has been a tendency to read Hershman's work as redemptive by configuring a narrative of Hershman and her practice as that of a victimized woman, who, in the end, finds redemption through her art. I argue, however, that this loaded narrative, in which Hershman is cast as a victim, is an inadvertent attempt to redeem her for her noncommittal portrayal of her subjectivity. The political potential in Hershman's work, I argue, lies not in her ability to redeem herself from victimization through her art, but in the constant re-framing of the question of her subjectivity, and female subjectivity more broadly. This potential, I argue, is also what is threatening about her work. Hershman's unknowability, her evasive and unreliable portrayal of her 'self' – her 'identity-promiscuity', as I will call it – is both that which provides her work with critical agency, and also precisely that which elicits the tendency to read her work as

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<sup>1</sup> Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 1 and 7.

redemptive. Like Bersani's claims about the flaws of 'real life', I argue that there is a historical mourning for a phantasmatic experience – here, of 'purity' – that defines the cultural threat of the figure of the whore, or the 'promiscuous' woman. By designating her as a victim, the figure of the whore is redeemed. The redemptive narrative, however, stabilizes Hershman in her game of identity hide-and-seek, as well as the indeterminate female subjectivity her work proposes. By deploying the figure of the whore as an inherently dialectical image, through which her threat and her agency might be revealed, I aim to show that while the temptation to redeem Hershman as a victim is due to her infidelity to a singular, essential selfhood, her infidelity is precisely the political potency her work.

### ***Dante Hotel and The Electronic Diaries: Between the Truth and the Lie***

In *The Culture of Redemption*, Leo Bersani discusses the problematic temptation to read art as a recuperative repetition of the 'damaged or valueless experience' of real life.<sup>2</sup> Past experience and its flaws are mourned, and then, with the divine band aid of art, rewritten and redeemed. For Bersani, Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* specifically prompts redemptive readings. Bersani points to a section of the second volume, *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower* (1919), in which the narrator reveals that, as Bersani puts it, a life 'realized within the confines of a book' is far more valuable than that same life outside a book, pointing to his anxieties about 'real life' as requiring representation in order to squeeze out its 'truth', its value, or, indeed, its justification for having occurred at all.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption*, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

This tendency to read art as symptomatic of 'real life' experiences, he argues, is, essentially, a Freudian problem. Freudian psychoanalysis determines ego activities, or here, the art object, as symbolic deflection of libidinal desires. Freud, as he expresses in *Three Essays on Sexuality*, determines art, and all cultural activities, as a moment of sublimation, as a 'substitute' or 'symbol', that enables 'excessively strong excitations arising from particular sources of sexuality to find an outlet and use in other fields.'<sup>4</sup> He explains, 'powerful components are acquired for every kind of cultural achievement by this diversion of sexual instinctual forces from sexual aims and their direction to new ones – a process which deserves the name of "sublimation."'<sup>5</sup> Bersani focuses particularly on the way in which sublimations, or rather their symptoms, are formed in relation to an originating pleasurable activity as a repetition, a 'reparation or restitution.'<sup>6</sup> Symptom formation recuperates a historical desire. This is what determines, Bersani argues, the redemptive tendency of art: if art is understood as the symptom or sublimation of past desire, it is positioned as the redeemer of that missed moment. This line of thinking requires art to bear the responsibility of making up for the 'failed experience' of real life, and its stunted sexual energy. Art, then, Bersani writes, 'is the original (but originally missed) contact with phenomena.'<sup>7</sup> Art becomes the memory, repeated and rewritten, to make up for the originating moment's failures.

Bersani's argument here is useful, in that identifies a cultural problem. That there is a tendency to read art as the symptom and sublimation of a diverted sexual energy

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<sup>4</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Three Essays on Sexuality', in *The Essentials of Psycho-Analysis: The Definitive Collection of Sigmund Freud's Writing*, ed. by Anna Freud (London: Penguin Book, 1991), pp. 269-375 (p. 371).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 319.

<sup>6</sup> Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption*, p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 28.



renders art as problematically limited to serving as visionary imitation or repetition of life. This tendency also problematically renders life as *requiring* recuperation, whereby life is always, in some sense, traumatic, and art acts as its savior and redeemer. Furthermore, this tendency designates a closed relationship between art and life that demands a kind of fidelity between them. To read art as recuperative of life implies that by understanding one's life, one can understand one's art, or vice-versa. While some autobiographical art works express this fidelity, typically through confession, truth-telling, and revelation, to read all art within this closed relationship would undermine the potential of any work that refuses or resists that relationship, or work for which that relationship is not particularly relevant. This prescriptive reading of art also prompts a primary dilemma of representation – is it true or false, or somewhere in between? While Hershman's work, in some places, deploys autobiography as a strategy, to read her work as redemptive would undermine the most powerful aspect of her work: that it questions, morphs, and unravels the relationship between the truth and the lie, and between art and life. Her play between the truth and the lie, between subjectivities that we don't know whether we can trust, is crucial to the politics of her practice. There is a danger in reading her work as reflective or redemptive of her life, and there is a danger in assuming that Hershman means what she says. In assuming a binary relationship between truth and lie, and a closed relationship between art and life, there is a danger in pathologizing the artist, conflating potentially traumatic or victimizing representations with therapeutic expressions of her personal experience. By reading Hershman's art as a mirror for her personal life, we might miss the politics that emerges from the gap between them.

Through her art works, Hershman has often cloned and camouflaged herself, leaving her 'self' unstable, the 'truth' which that self speaks unreliable, and her work rife with critical proposals about the in/determinable female subject. My analysis of a selection of Hershman's works from the 1970s through the present involves primary

research in Hershman's papers, in which I examine a range of pieces across disciplines, from sculpture, to performance, to film, that focus primarily on the question of multiple selves.

Hershman's early works from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s involved the production of anthropomorphic wax sculptures, usually modeled on herself – masks, hands, feet, and other detached body parts. Her 1973-4 piece, *The Dante Hotel*, was a 'permanent' exhibition (lasting nine months) in a room in the run-down hotel of the same name in San Francisco, available 24 hours a day to the public, in which Hershman installed a number of her wax sculptures. Two 'dead' women lay in the hotel bed, one with a 'blackened' face, implying a violent back-story to the incident.<sup>8</sup> Setup almost like a crime scene, the installation elicited a foreboding atmosphere. As Alfred Frankenstein (perhaps aptly named) describes the display of 'these artful corpses' in a 1974 review, 'rumpled blankets around the figures helped to create an effect of death under hopeless circumstances. Clothes in the closet, shoes under the bed, a radio and [living] goldfish on the dresser made the whole thing just that more pathetic.'<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, as the exhibition continued, elements of the scene were pilfered by attendees – 'the clothes, the radio, the goldfish' – leaving, to Frankenstein's impression, only one wax lady in the room, lying in the bed.<sup>10</sup> Hershman describes the last visit to the room by a man named Owen Moore at

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<sup>8</sup> Laura Cumming, 'Lynn Hershman Leeson: Origins of the Species (Part 2) Review – Always Alert to the Future', *Guardian*, 31 May 2015

<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/31/lynn-hershman-leeson-review-modern-art-oxford-origins-of-the-species-part-2> [accessed 2 July 2015].

<sup>9</sup> Alfred Frankenstein, 'The Macabre Rooms of the Wax Ladies', *This World*, Art Section, p. 27, (13 October 1974), Lynn Hershman-Leeson Papers, M1452, Box 54, Folder 8, Stanford University, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

3am, nine months into the exhibition. Because the bulb in the room had previously burnt out, Moore was given a flashlight to view the exhibition. Upon entering the room, with the beam aimed at the remaining lady in the bed, Moore believed he saw an actual corpse.<sup>11</sup> In his state of alarm, he called the police, who confiscated all the elements of the exhibition and brought them to central headquarters, where, rumor has it, they still have not been claimed.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Lynn Hershman, 'Private I: An Investigator's Timeline', in *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson: Secret Agents, Private I*, ed. by Meredith Tromble (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 12-103 (p. 20).



Figure 10: Wax figure in *Dante Hotel*, Lynn Hershman, 1973-4

Moore's inability to distinguish the artificial from the artifact in the room of faux-corpse is perhaps bald proof of the work's finesse in blurring the distinction between the real and the artificial. The acute contrast of the goldfish, a fragile living creature, amidst a room of the un-living – both because 'dead' and, more importantly, because made of wax – clearly points to the overlapping and indistinct relationship between the real and the fake in Hershman's configuration of representation. Some of Hershman's notes point clearly to her interest in the integration and fragmentation of the real and the artificial.

When discussing the importance of reading the context, or what's 'real' outside of the artwork, as part of one's experience of that artwork itself and therefore its meaning, she writes:

The incorporation of 'real' objects that become simultaneously metaphoric symbols creates intrinsic tension in a work of context by causing a constant shift between planned reality and virtual reality. Artifact becomes artifice. Boundaries blur as "real" life augments intention.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps, as much as the scene becomes 'real' due to its proximity of the artificial to the artifact, the reality outside the work – the real hotel room, the real goldfish – becomes artifice. The artifacts become blurred into the artificial construction of the scene. The apparent violence of the scene, and the tragic portrayal of women, then, is perhaps undermined by the scene's artificiality. And yet, the shadow of the living – the goldfish that *is*, and the 'dead' women who *might have been* – remains as much a part of the scene. This blurring of representational frameworks instills a significant instability in her work, through which a singular reading is rendered unsustainable.

Arguably, in *Dante Hotel*, there is an element of the ridiculous that comes through in the real-but-fake reproductions of body parts, and a melodramatic absurdity to the violence implied through their composition. There is a similar absurdity that comes through in other wax-works by the artist. In this same review, Frankenstein refers to another exhibition of Hershman's wax sculptures in the context of a gallery, in which the morbid depictions of dead women are graced with the nuance of a punned title. For example, the sculpture of a female corpse wearing a sari as a shroud is entitled *Sorry*,

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<sup>13</sup> Lynn Hershman, 'Preliminary Notes on a Theory of Context', 1971, Lynn Hershman-Leeson Papers, M1452, Box 20, Folder 11.

while a wax foot emerging from a toaster is entitled *The Toester*.<sup>14</sup> Hershman's deliberate choice to use humor, particularly in the accessible form of the pun, points towards the absurdity of the images portrayed, but also towards the resultant awkwardness of pairing death with humor. While death and humor might be a classic pairing, there is a darkly poignant quality at play here, in which these works point to the morbidity of finding cultural pleasure in going to view 'dead' women, laughing at it, and calling it 'art', imbuing the work with an inherent unease.

In a video work entitled *The Electronic Diaries* (1986-94), like her faux-body sculptures, Hershman similarly plays on the borders between artifice and artifact. In a close-up shot of just Hershman's shoulders and face, with a neutral background, Hershman speaks directly to a single camera about her family, her childhood, and her personal traumas. Shot in a diaristic style, spanning tape from nearly ten years of footage, Hershman's stories read like a confessional memoir. But, as David James suggests, the sincerity of these stories is disputable:

From my point of view the most interesting aspect of *The Electronic Diaries* [...] is its disputation of the claims (made both within the tape itself and by the tradition of which it is a part) that diary-making or autobiography or even psychotherapy can lead to the recovery of an authentic self. The more the tape lays claim to sincerity, the more it admits duplicity and the less it is able to distinguish one from the other.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Frankenstein refers to this exhibition as occurring at the William Sawyer gallery, but I can find no evidence of any such exhibition around 1974. Perhaps he's referring to her 1970 exhibition there.

<sup>15</sup> David James, 'The Electronic Self', clipping from unidentified newspaper, Los Angeles, Lynn Hershman-Leeson Papers, M1452, Box 51 File 1.



Figure 11: Lynn Hershman, *The Electronic Diaries*, 1996

James supports this by giving examples from the diary of 'implausible stories', such as 'graduating from college as a teenager', or enduring 'several years of hospitalization for heart failure', or 'leaving her husband to become a hooker'. These unlikely stories, he convincingly argues, productively 'discredit her sincerity in general and her particular complaints about struggles with her weight or the abuse she suffered as a child.'<sup>16</sup>

While this reading of the work lends itself to an enticing interpretation of the fragmented post-modern subject, especially in regards to the female subject and her identity as victim, Hershman, in a 1991 interview with Moira Roth and Diane Tani, reiterates these stories as her lived history, providing veritable details of said moments in her life. For example, she says she 'participated in a unique program. An educational

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

team canvassed Ohio and chose 15 children to participate in this experiment.' She claims she went to Case Western Reserve University in Ohio, and graduated at 12, after which point she had to re-enter high school. She also states she found out she had cardiomyopathy while pregnant in 1964 and spent two years in and out of the hospital. But while Hershman lays claim to these stories, which seem to validate the truth of her *Electronic Diaries*, it is unclear whether or not we should believe her.

That these 'implausible stories' may in fact be true potentially undoes James' persuasive claims regarding Hershman's portrayal of the fragmented female subject. On the other hand, the potential truth to these stories may enhance their mystery. Her potentially unconvincing delivery of these stories in *The Electronic Diaries* is an invitation to speculate about Hershman's sincerity, rendering the potential truth or artifice of these stories irrelevant, or secondary, to the effect of inducing confusion in the viewer.

*The Electronic Diaries* is a piece that presents itself as autobiography, and for B. Ruby Rich, this piece reads not only as confessional, but as the confession of truths.<sup>17</sup> She writes, 'although still reliant on language, her work expands the registers of evidence and confession to incorporate the visual representation and replication of the body,'<sup>18</sup> further configuring this and other works as deploying 'the talking cure, that famous Freudian device for dealing with trauma.'<sup>19</sup> Rich's analysis continues by relating Hershman's 'use of the double' as a 'summoning of a contemporary golem,'<sup>20</sup> a mythical Jewish figure

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<sup>17</sup> There are different versions of *The Electronic Diaries*. The version analyzed by Rich is entitled *First Person Plural: The Electronic Diaries*, which is the full-length edit of the work, featuring ten years of footage, from 1986-1996.

<sup>18</sup> B. Ruby Rich, 'My Other, My Self: Lynn Hershman and the Reinvention of the Golem', in *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman*, ed. by Tromble, 2005, pp. 158-67 (p. 161).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 162.



sometimes associated with protection (but more often associated with destruction.) For Rich, the figure of the golem, like Hershman's use of 'multiple replications of the self', not only might be 'conjured to protect' Hershman's younger abused self, but also to speak 'the truth'.<sup>21</sup> For Rich, the figure of the golem is deployed in order to examine how Hershman's strategic use of multiple selves in her work serves the purpose of protecting Hershman herself, as well to speak her 'truth'.

Rich's analysis of Hershman's practice brings us back to the problem of Freudian symptomology expressed by Bersani. Here, for Rich, Hershman's 'golem' acts as a symptom of Hershman's sublimated traumas, her traumatic past expressed as her double in order to have a voice in the present. However, the power of autobiographical work is often situated in the way it plays with 'truth-telling', and the *question*, rather than the certainty, of an individual subject's performance of authenticity.

In *Autobiography and Performance* (2008), Deirdre Heddon argues that 'the binary between fictional/real is notoriously unstable in all autobiographical performance.'<sup>22</sup> She also points out that many performances, such as mct's *Fingerlicks* and solo works by Bobby Baker and Tim Miller, strategically employ that ambiguity as a way to politicize the form itself.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, she writes, 'the sign "autobiography" serves as an authenticating symbol which underwrites an appeal to an unproblematised truth,' expressing the problematic assumption that 'autobiography' and 'truth' often

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 162-3.

<sup>22</sup> Deirdre Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 10.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

function within a closed relationship.<sup>24</sup> The relationship between ‘a life and its performed representation’, she argues, however, is ‘open to question’, not a fixed certitude.<sup>25</sup>

Heddon continues by implying the assumed essentialism that can attach itself to fixing the relationship between life and representation, when she states, ‘the presentation of self (in performance particularly) is a re-presentation, and often a strategic one.’<sup>26</sup> That the presentation of self is often ‘strategic’ indicates that it is, in part, constructed, and therefore not reducible to an essential or inherent identity. For Jen Harvie, the female autobiographical subject is both useful and problematic: while the subject’s testimony of marginalized experience is valuable, her position as the subject of the testimony lends itself to essentialist readings, whereby ‘she’ might be seen to singularly stand in for female identity in general.<sup>27</sup> But, as Harvie writes, many contemporary autobiographical works approach their work in ways that productively problematize the potentially essentializing power of testimony.<sup>28</sup> One strategy she points to is the ways in which both Cardiff and Emin – and, I add, Hershman – perform a ‘double movement between subjective presence and absence – between the artists’ dichotomous self-articulation as “me” and “her” – [which] thus articulates and explores the poststructuralist problematics of being a woman.’<sup>29</sup> Hershman’s physical presence and vocal testimony, her lack of reliability, and

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 25-6.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>27</sup> Jen Harvie, ‘Being Her: Presence, Absence and Performance in the Art of Janet Cardiff and Tracey Emin’, in *Auto/biography and Identity: Women, Theatre and Performance*, ed. by Maggie B. Gale and Viv Gardner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004) pp. 194-216 (p. 194).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 194-5.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 195-6.

her ambiguous portrayal of truth, position her as both 'self' and 'other', undermining the assumed singularity and truthfulness of her apparently autobiographical confessions.

*The Electronic Diaries*, along with other works by Hershman, question the value of 'truth-telling' itself. Here, the lie, or the ambiguity around its veracity, is more productive than the confession itself. That this work plays on the borderline between 'truth' and 'lie', presenting Hershman's subjectivity as ambiguously (un)believable, fragments any one-dimensional or essentializing reading of her subjecthood. As Hershman herself writes, 'truth is based in the inauthentic,'<sup>30</sup> – and whether we believe her on this theory is itself open to debate.

*Dante Hotel* and *The Electronic Diaries* are also compelling because they situate potentially 'victimized' female bodies within the question of authenticity/the real. From the 'dead' women in hotel rooms, to Hershman's untrustworthy confessions of abuse on camera, the female subject portrayed in some of her works could certainly be perceived as a victim. The introductory arguments made by Howard Fox in *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson*, do not particularly engage with the ambiguity of Hershman's authenticity, instead focusing on the ways in which her work follows a narrative arc from victimhood to redemption – an arc, he argues, that mirrors Hershman's life. His description of Hershman and her work, like Rich's, interestingly falls in line with what Bersani critiques as the redemptive tendency in art, whereby Hershman's art becomes a remedial way to work through her personal traumas, suggesting that her later works express a kind of resistance or agency not present in early works, as Hershman herself finds emancipation through autonomy.

Fox distinguishes Hershman from her peers of the 1970s, whereby artists like Martha Rosler, Linda Montano, and Judy Chicago were 'optimistic', interested in 'self-

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<sup>30</sup> Lynn Hershman, 'Romancing the Anti-Body: Lust and Longing in (Cyber)Space', in *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson*, ed. by Tromble, 2005, pp. 182-7 (p. 183).

realization and social change'. Hershman, on the other hand, was 'pessimistic', or perhaps, a 'realist', focusing instead on 'real and potential sources of victimization' whereby she often positions herself in the role of the victim – or perhaps as a 'sentinel', pointing to and revealing sources of female victimization.<sup>31</sup> The early role of the victim Fox ascribes to Hershman is 'inevitable', he writes, given her history of childhood abuse, declaring her concerns with victimization as a psychologically resultant preoccupation due to her personal experiences,<sup>32</sup> suggesting a kind of Freudian symptomology or sublimation of Hershman's traumas into her art.

Fox contrasts Hershman's earlier works, such as *Roberta Breitmore* (1974-78) and *Dante Hotel* (1973-74), with her cyberart from the early to mid-1990s, such as *America's Finest, Room of One's Own* (1990-93), and *Paranoid Mirror* (1995-96), stating that the early pieces 'investigated issues of personal vulnerability and victimhood', while in the mid-career work, 'there is a determined mood of resistance and rebellion'.<sup>33</sup> In discussing Hershman's mid-1990s cyber works, Fox writes,

The motive and desire for inner liberation might have been present in the artist, but the operative motive in her cyberart was still fear and anger [...]. Thus Hershman herself, still marooned in her own personal purgatory, had not yet matched the technical and ideological trajectory of her highly personal art.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Howard N. Fox, 'Breaking the Code', in *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson*, ed. by Tromble, 2005, pp. 1-11 (p. 4).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

Fox expands on his portrait of the artist by narrativizing an arc in which both Hershman and her work move through victimization, towards resentful resistance, and finally to what he refers to as 'redemption', 'emancipation', and 'autonomy.'<sup>35</sup> In moving towards her later works of the late 1990s and 2000s, such as her films, *Conceiving Ada* (1997) and *Teknolust* (2002), Fox identifies a fulfillment of the artist's projected desire for 'liberation'. On *Conceiving Ada*, Fox comments that, unlike her earlier work, this film 'concludes without victims and with resolution and love.'<sup>36</sup> Regarding *Teknolust*, Hershman's latest film at the time of the publication of this book, he observes, 'finally there is redemption in Hershman's art.'<sup>37</sup>

Fox narrativizes a redemptive quality to Hershman's later pieces, positing them as recuperative of her earlier, more victim-oriented work. He also links this narrative arc to her life, whereby her traumatic personal experiences are redeemed or healed by her art. The assumption that Hershman's work and personal life are so strongly bound, as expressed particularly in his conjecture that Hershman's early works focus on victimization due to her childhood abuse, and that they are *symptomatically* connected, stages Hershman's work as the psychological sublimation of Hershman's own fears, desires and experiences, and pathologizes her practice in the process. While reading art and life as connected is not inherently problematic, as it is a concept rigorously investigated by many artists, it is the particular symptomatic relationship set up within this redemptive reading that is problematic in political terms.

In his introduction to *The Art of Living* (2015), Dominic Johnson sets up a useful illustration of the value of work that blurs life and art. He tracks the development of work engaged in the 'life-art continuum' from Duchamp's 'Readymades', through the 1950s,

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 4, 7, 8, and 10.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

1960s, and 1970s, with artists like Robert Rauschenberg recontextualizing found materials into his canvases. Equally, he points to Alan Kaprow's Happenings, as well as, as he writes, 'public interventions, pop-up events, and do-it-yourself artworks, epitomized by the agitprop performances of Joseph Beuys, and the games- and instruction-based artworks of Fluxus artists like George Brecht and Yoko Ono'<sup>38</sup> as works that typify the neo-avant-garde and post-modernist work that sought to bring life into art and art into life. As part of the wider project of his book, he explains, 'we confront performance depicted not simply as a formal commitment, but as the ontological ground for a revolutionised way of living.'<sup>39</sup> For Johnson, the blurry relationship between art and life in performance is one which engenders and produces alterity.

While this reading of art-as-life/life-as-art could certainly be applied to Hershman's work, the way in which Fox and Rich engage with the art-life question seems not to focus on the ways in which her work might 'test *how to live* – to live more fully, more atypically, more perversely', as Johnson suggests.<sup>40</sup> Rather, what seems to underlie their interpretation of this particular art-life relationship is the conflation of experience with 'truth', art as representation of that truth, and one's subjective reading as its authentication. Artists like Joseph Beuys and Allan Kaprow tested the relationship between life and representation, experimenting with the ways in which they might overlap, producing myths, ambiguities, and slippages; however, these particular readings of Hershman's work seem to singularize that relationship. What might be interpreted as an exciting conflict is here rendered into an answer, deployed here to justify her art as redeemer of her life – and then used to justify her life by its recuperation in her art. The

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<sup>38</sup> Dominic Johnson, *The Art of Living: An Oral History of Performance Art* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 2.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3. Emphasis in original.

difference between Johnson's reading of the art-life continuum as fruitful ground for a 'revolutionised way of living,'<sup>41</sup> and the tendency to read Hershman's art as recuperative of her life, is that the latter invites pathologizing readings of the artist and her work. The presence of 'traumatic' material in Hershman's art and life further amplifies that invitation. The danger, I argue, in reading her work within a closed relationship between life and art, and particularly one which assumes a therapeutic demonstration of her personal traumas, is that the critical ability of her work can easily be dismissed.

The danger of pathologizing an artist, the process of diagnosing someone as 'psychologically unhealthy',<sup>42</sup> is made clear by Johnson in 'Psychic Weight: The Pains and Pleasure of Performance', where he discusses the problematic tendency to read ORLAN's surgical art works of the 1990s as a passive expression of her own traumatic personal history. Johnson critiques Kristine Stiles for her problematic analysis of injurious performances by women, whereby, for Stiles, the artist passively replicates the abuse produced by patriarchal oppression.<sup>43</sup> For Stiles, such art is the symptom, replaying and reiterating earlier personal traumas, in which the artist reproduces the effects of the system that inflicts abuse.<sup>44</sup> For Johnson, Stiles goes so far as to 'fictionalise' a history of sexual trauma to justify, or explain, ORLAN's work, whereby the latter acts as 'proof' of

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> 'Pathologize', in *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, Oxford University Press, September 2015 <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/138804>> [accessed September 24, 2015].

<sup>43</sup> Dominic Johnson, 'Psychic Weight: The Pains and Pleasure of Performance', in *ORLAN: A Hybrid Body of Artworks*, ed. by Simon Donger with ORLAN and Simon Shepherd (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 85-99 (p. 92).

<sup>44</sup> Kristine Stiles, 'Never Enough is Something Else: Feminist Performance Art, Probity, and the Avant-Garde', in *Contours of the Theatrical Avant-Garde: Performance and Textuality*, ed. by James M. Harding (Madison: University of Madison/Wisconsin, 2000), pp. 239-89 (p. 257-9.)

these (imagined) events,<sup>45</sup> configuring them as ‘the pitiable histrionics of a scarred mind,’ and as symptoms of ‘a disfigured self-esteem’.<sup>46</sup> For Stiles, ORLAN’s work displays no agency – she even refers to it and other female performance work as responsible for ‘the failure of feminist art,’<sup>47</sup> discrediting the value of her work on the assumption that it is an unprocessed expression of her traumatic experiences.

Implicitly countering Stiles’ reading, Heddon cites the early 1970s – a prolific time for Hershman (and a point of origin for ORLAN’s work) – as a time when autobiographical performance was actively deployed for its political potential by the feminist movement. Aligned with the slogan ‘the personal is political,’ autobiographical performance, Heddon writes, ‘was inarguably tied to consciousness-raising activities which focused analysis specifically on women’s experiences.’<sup>48</sup> She cites works by Lynn Hershman, Rachel Rosenthal, and Carolee Schneemann when she continues to explain that autobiographical performances, which explored ‘the problems of everyday life’, enabled women to see their individual problems as part of the ‘collective oppression’ of their entire sex.<sup>49</sup> ‘The binary between art and life,’ she writes, ‘collapsed as feminists consciously incorporated their lives into their art making [...] as many artists strategically understood their art as feminist praxis.’<sup>50</sup> But, Heddon, points out, there is a danger in female performances of confession.<sup>51</sup> Heddon suggests ‘that when personal experiences

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<sup>45</sup> Johnson, ‘Psychic Weight’, p. 92.

<sup>46</sup> Stiles, ‘Never Enough is Something Else’, p. 258.

<sup>47</sup> Cited in Johnson, ‘Psychic Weight’, p. 92.

<sup>48</sup> Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance*, p. 21.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.



are expressed via the female voice, they are perceived as being informal and lacking in authority [...]. Feminised, such autobiographical practices are then trivialized.<sup>52</sup>

Just as female autobiographical performance risks trivialization, female body-based performances also risk disavowal. As Johnson argues, 'Stiles interprets women's performances as narcissistic exhibitionism, a criticism that was leveled at body-oriented female practitioners of the 1960s including Carolee Schneemann and Hannah Wilke.'<sup>53</sup> The tendency to interpret female artists as hysterical, narcissistic, or traumatized, has been used to discredit work by female artists for decades (if not centuries.) As Rebecca Schneider points out, for example, due to the physical and literal presence of her body in her work, Schneemann 'was often dismissed as self-indulgent and narcissistic by the art establishment. [And] she was not alone.'<sup>54</sup> Lucy Lippard also identifies this problem, whereby, she explains, it is acceptable for men to display women, but when women display themselves, they are dismissed as narcissists.<sup>55</sup>

Fox does not in any way come close to the kind of destructive analysis performed by Stiles, nor does he attempt to discredit Hershman's work. His aim, rather, is to demonstrate its agency, which, for him, resides in its redemptive power. But, the danger in treating Hershman's work as representative of her life – as a truthful re-telling of her traumas and rise to autonomy – is that it *invites* a pathologizing reading. There is a small leap – albeit a vexingly conservative one – from reading her expressions of trauma as enabling personal agency to a dismissal of such agency as mere narcissism or therapy. Additionally, due to the ways in which female artists' work is often discredited due to an assumed relationship between 'the personal' and self-indulgence, Fox's analysis,

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., pp. 4-5.

<sup>53</sup> Johnson, 'Psychic Weight,' p. 92.

<sup>54</sup> Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 31.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

inadvertently, renders Hershman's critical ability at risk of disavowal. Johnson suggests, 'by resisting the urge to pathologize the artist, one asserts the usefulness of trauma narratives for conceptualizing the spectator's critical investment in the work.'<sup>56</sup> For Johnson, and I agree, pathologizing an artist therefore endangers her or his work's critical, or political efficacy. If pathologizing is resisted, and other forms of analysis are deployed, the value of works, particularly those that deal with trauma, can be claimed.

### ***Roberta Breitmore: Multiple Subjectivity***

What's at stake in pathologizing Hershman is the risk of dismissing the powerful politics of her work, particularly her consistent proposal that female subjectivity is multiple.

*Roberta Breitmore* is an art-life project that exemplifies this central concern. From 1973 to 1978, Hershman simultaneously inhabited the existence of an invented persona: Roberta Breitmore. Hershman constructed Roberta as an 'alternative personality'<sup>57</sup> who 'came to life' through a simple and superficial appearance-transformation consisting of donning a blonde wig which half-covered her face, dressing in a mini skirt, a fringed suede jacket and go-go boots, and executing a make-up routine according to a 'construction chart.' Roberta had her own apartment, a driving license, a checking account, and a therapist in her own name, as well as her own handwriting, physical and emotional behaviors, personal history from childhood, and 'real-life adventures'.<sup>58</sup> This

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<sup>56</sup> Johnson, 'Psychic Weight', p. 92.

<sup>57</sup> Lynn Hershman, 'Retrospective Notes: Roberta Breitmore, 1971-78, San Diego, Ferrara Italy, San Francisco. A Performance of experience in real time and real life,' Lynn Hershman-Leeson Papers, M1452, Box 20 File 14.

<sup>58</sup> Lynn Hershman, 'Private I: An Investigator's Timeline', p. 25.

piece, however, only exists in its documentation. It was a 'private performance'<sup>59</sup> through which passersby were unknowing spectators to an art work – a semblance of a 'life' – that was being recorded through photographs, documents, records, and charts.



Figure 12: Lynn Hershman, *Roberta at Bus Stop*, 1978

Roberta's first 'adventure' was to place a personal advertisement in the newspaper for a roommate (although the language of the ad also seems to solicit sexual partners), which garnered 43 responses. The (mostly) male respondents she encountered became part of Roberta's new life narrative. One meeting with a respondent took place at the San

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<sup>59</sup> Roberta Mock, 'Lynn Hershman and the Creation of Multiple Robertas', in *Identity, Performance and Technology: Practices of Empowerment, Embodiment and Technicity*, ed. by Susan Broadhurst and Josephine Machon (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillian: 2012), pp. 126-41 (p. 126).

Diego Zoo. The man and his colleagues, she soon realized, were there to recruit Roberta into their prostitution ring. Roberta went to the bathroom and disappeared – she came out unrecognizable as Lynn Hershman and escaped the perilous situation.

In 1976 Lynn began hiring surrogates, or Roberta-multiples, because her ‘adventures [had become] so complex and negative.’<sup>60</sup> Eventually, there were four different people performing, or living, as Roberta, enduring her adventures as a struggling single woman in San Francisco. In 1978, she even held a Roberta look-alike contest at the De Young Museum in San Francisco.<sup>61</sup> Later that year, in the Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara, Italy, Roberta was exorcised in a ritualistic performance in which Roberta (performed by multiple surrogates, including Kristine Stiles)<sup>62</sup> was laid to rest.<sup>63</sup> Subsequently, a comic book was made in collaboration with Spain Rodriguez, illustrating 27 of Roberta’s adventures.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>61</sup> Mary Stofflet-Santiago, ‘Portrait of the Artist as Social Observation’ in *ARTWEEK* April 29 1978, Gallery Paule Anglim, Lynn Hershman-Leeson Papers, M1452, Box 51 Folder 6.

<sup>62</sup> Coincidentally, Kristine Stiles was the first Roberta ‘multiple’. Stiles has apparently written about her experience as ‘Roberta’, but the piece has been removed from her website, and now, I believe, only exists in Stiles’ papers at Duke University Library.

<sup>63</sup> Hershman, ‘Private I: An Investigator’s Timeline’, p. 30.



Figure 13: Lynn Hershman, *Roberta Multiples*, 1977

In her retrospective notes, Hershman describes Roberta as ‘an archetypal mirror that reflected the values and accoutrements of the portions of culture she penetrated.’<sup>64</sup> Roberta was created as a construction of her cultural context; she was fabricated as victim to the socio-political stipulations of her culture. Overweight, unemployed, alienated and depressed, Roberta was initially designed for suicide.<sup>65</sup> As Hershman explains, ‘It seemed like Roberta reflected negative experiences. Everything she did somehow made her more of a victim. That’s when I realized she had to have an end.’<sup>66</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Lynn Hershman, ‘Retrospective Notes: Roberta Breitmore, 1971-78 San Diego, Ferrara Italy, San Francisco. A Performance of experience in real time and real life’.

<sup>65</sup> Lynn Hershman, ‘Simulations and Performances: Roberta Breitmore’, Lynn Hershman-Leeson Papers, M1452, Box 20 File 14.

<sup>66</sup> Moira Roth and Diane Tani, Interview with Lynn Hershman, Berkeley, 9 October 1991, Lynn Hershman-Leeson Papers, M1452, Box 20, Folder 2.

While Roberta Breitmore might have been designed as a victim, Hershman's use of the third person here is interesting – it distinguishes Roberta as another subject, perhaps suggesting a distance between Roberta's designed victimhood and Hershman's personal existence. But Hershman's language around Roberta often resists a singular reading, and often blurs the two identities in an ambiguous relationship. In an interview with Christine Tamblyn, Hershman refers to Roberta as being formed as a method of personal emancipation, not as the culture-victim she describes in other places. Because Hershman claims she was diagnosed with cardiomyopathy in 1964 and told that she would only have three more years to live, she states she 'wanted to experience everything I could while I had the chance.' She says, 'getting into [Roberta's] boots [...] gave me access to her autonomy.'<sup>67</sup> There's a useful contradiction here: Roberta is both the victim (of contemporary culture) and the form of Hershman's emancipation, and Roberta's emancipation is also her ultimate victimization – death. This incongruity seems to entangle the narrative of victimhood-towards-redemption in such a way that renders both Hershman and Roberta victimized and autonomous simultaneously and not at all. But more interesting than that entanglement, I argue, is Hershman's own resistance to providing a singular truth about her relationship to Roberta, further fragmenting the idea of a singular identity, whether as victim, autonomous, or otherwise.

The relationship between Hershman's subjectivity and Roberta's is ambiguous. Hershman and Roberta move fluidly between each other, creating a doubling of identities, a dialectical journey between two selves. The fluidity of that jointure is apparent in Hershman's physical transformation into Roberta. The complexity of that multiplication is registered through the knowledge that Hershman is, in a sense, 'in control' of Roberta. Hershman's deployment of three surrogate Robertas drives home the

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<sup>67</sup> Christine Tamblyn, 'Introduction to Roberta Breitmore', Lynn Hershman-Leeson Papers, M1452, Box 20 File 12.

dilemma of subjectivity as plural, of a female subjectivity that is striated, layered, contradictory, and indiscernible, begging the question, to whom might this victim-narrative, if we are indeed to call it that, belong?

In a letter from friend and art critic Jack Burnham, Roberta's status as victim is raised, as well as her complicated relationship with Hershman, when he writes,

In a way, Roberta is a classical victim of men's casualness and revenge-oriented behavior towards women [...]. Somehow I don't want to be seen or even associated with that category. And I guess I am afraid at times that Lynn is trying to say something about her life through Roberta.<sup>68</sup>

Interestingly, in a subsequent letter responding to repeated requests from Roberta (not Hershman) to write an introduction for 'her' projected exhibition at the De Young Museum, he seems all-too-aware of Roberta's constructed-ness, as the letter, which appears quite facetious, denigrates Roberta's skills as an artist – again, not Hershman's. It is quite a harsh letter, even offensive, but we know from Burnham's previous correspondence that he and Hershman have a personal relationship, and that he is aware that Roberta Breitmore was a work. Perhaps he is participating here to build up Roberta's fictional narrative, when he writes,

As a busy art critic with several important publications pending, I could not imagine devoting time to the sorry idiosyncracies [*sic*] of some obscure woman, a person obviously more than a trifle unstable, who promises to 'tell all' in a visual tapestry of self-revelation, or to put it less charitably, a virtual orgy of teen-age

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<sup>68</sup> Jack Wesley Burnham, personal correspondence, 6 November 1977, Lynn Hershman-Leeson Papers, M1452, Box 20 File 11.

indulgence. The idea of writing something repelled me profoundly. Yet in spite of all protestations, Roberta persisted that I write her introduction. Just to be rid of the matter I agreed [...]. Hopefully, to secure the educational safety of our children and our loved ones, Roberta will not at some alter date indulge in the melodramatic act of 'suicide,' but will take up color-field painting, study with Philip Pearlstein in New York, or perhaps do volunteer work for the museums, all activities of a redeeming social nature.<sup>69</sup>

While this letter might seem spiteful and churlish, it appears Burnham is purposefully participating in Roberta's construction as an identity. It also seems that he is facetiously citing criticisms of Hershman's work, when he uses the term 'indulgence', or suggests that she 'take up color-field painting', perhaps a more 'redeeming', or respectable art form. He seems to be poking fun at Hershman with a wink, as if they are both in on the joke. But what this letter points to, and produces, is the entangled relationship between Hershman and Roberta. Whose exhibition are they referring to here? Roberta's or Hershman's? The flippant tone of this letter suggests a kind of meta-awareness of Roberta's existence as a construct, albeit one that actively contributes to her blurry and overlapping identity.

Roberta's self-awareness of her own constructed identity is made further evident in a psychiatric evaluation, in which the analyst describes Roberta's physical appearance:

She was disheveled particularly at the first interview when her long blond wig [was] obvious due to improper placement. She wore large dark glasses throughout both interviews and sat sideways to avoid looking directly and hid her face behind

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<sup>69</sup> Jack Burnham, personal correspondence, 5 January 1978, Lynn Hershman-Leeson Papers, M1452 Box 51 File 6.



her hair [...]. She was totally unaware of her seductive posture and recognized anxious body movements, such as pulling at her skirt, only when they were pointed out.<sup>70</sup>

This description paints a useful picture of Roberta as 'unknowingly' or inappropriately sexual and anxious, and also portrays Roberta – a mask in and of herself – as adorning herself in disguise-like costume, between the 'obvious' wig and the dark sunglasses. Roberta, as a character, plays up to her constructed-ness. The self-awareness of her fabrication comes up again in a personal document by friend Irwin Irwin, who writes (of both Hershman and Breitmore interchangeably), 'she's posing again.'<sup>71</sup> The 'pose' – like the mask, like drag – is a self-fashioning, a construction of identity, of 'self.'

Amelia Jones discusses Roberta's 'pose', comparing her to Cindy Sherman – whose work Roberta preceded – as one 'who perfected the self-as-fake strategy that so effectively discombobulates oppressive social stereotypes of feminine comportment and behavior.'<sup>72</sup> Like Sherman's photographs of herself in various guises, personas, or characters, Hershman constructs and inhabits structures of femininity, indicating not only the constructed nature of Roberta, but also of femininity, or female subjectivity, itself. Roberta's 'construction chart', in which Hershman shows us her 'transformation', via the superficiality of makeup and wig, exemplifies this identity construction. As Roberta Mock points out, the 'photographs and portraits that have often been heavily manipulated, annotated and over-written with paint and cosmetics by Hershman [...] emphasise

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<sup>70</sup> 'Psychiatric Evaluation – Confidential', Lynn Hershman-Leeson Papers, M1452, Box 51 File 8.

<sup>71</sup> Irwin Irwin, 'Lynn Hershman as Secret Agent', 1980, Lynn Hershman-Leeson Papers, M1452, Box 20, File 11.

<sup>72</sup> Amelia Jones, 'Roberta Breitmore Lives On', in *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson*, ed. by Tromble, 2005, pp. 105- 11 (p. 107).

processes of gender construction and/or decay.<sup>73</sup> Roberta's construction, her pose, and her charts, reflects the construction of female subjectivity itself. Furthermore, her transformation back and forth between two identities acts as an embodiment of the instability and plurality inherent in female subjectivity.

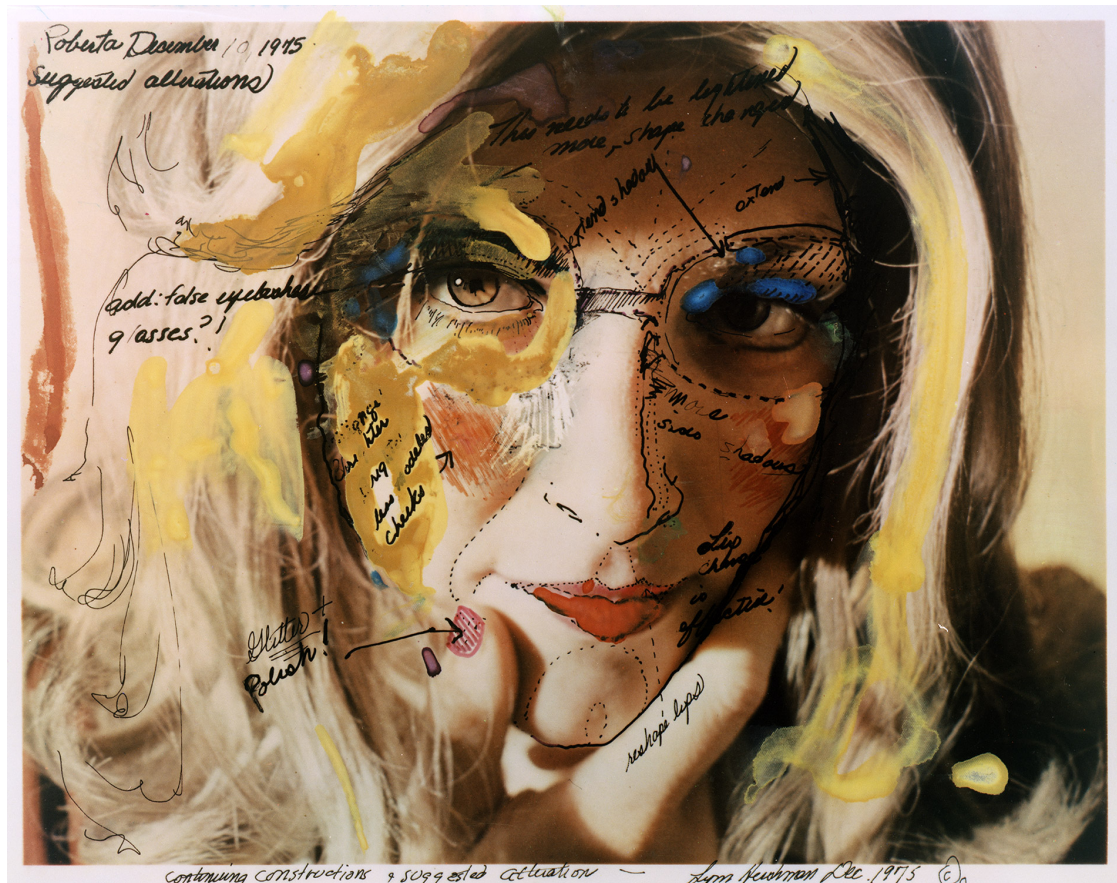


Figure 14: Lynn Hershman, *Roberta Construction Chart #2*, 1975

As Jones writes, 'enacting a perpetual process of virtual becoming, Hershman stages the self as both simulacral and embodied. LH<-->RB: they exist as interrelated sides of one Möbius strip of selfhood.'<sup>74</sup> Jones indicates here the way in which

<sup>73</sup> Mock, 'Lynn Hershman and the Creation of Multiple Robertas', p. 128.

<sup>74</sup> Amelia Jones, 'This Life' in *Frieze* 117 (September 2008)

<[http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/this\\_life/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/this_life/)> [accessed 9 July 2015].

Roberta/Hershman enact a dialectical subjectivity, constantly and ambiguously shutting back and forth between the two. She continues to suggest, parenthetically, that ‘perhaps we are the arrows in the liminal gap between the LH and the RB.’<sup>75</sup> Perhaps, she seems to be saying, the plurality in the LH<-->RB subjectivity is typical of all subjectivity.

An early work of Hershman’s entitled *Self Portrait as Another Person* (1965), a wax sculpture of her own face wearing a wig, exemplifies the pluralistic ‘othering’ Hershman’s work embodies. She is both herself and ‘another’, simultaneously. Similarly, she created and broadcast a commercial to advertise a site-specific work in New York in 1974, in which she cast two male and five female performers, each of whom were to identify as Lynn Hershman. Hershman, Frankenstein writes, ‘then becomes everyman (and woman)’.<sup>76</sup> This commercial, which aired on ‘KPIX in San Francisco at 7:20pm on October 30,’ portrays Hershman’s identity as multiple and constructed.<sup>77</sup>



Figure 15: Lynn Hershman, *Self Portrait as Another Person*, 1965

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Frankenstein, ‘The Macabre Rooms of the Wax Ladies’.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

In *Roberta Breitmore* and other works, Hershman 'plays the field', trying on identities, moving between them, and exhibits her 'truth', or her 'true self' in a fluctuating, never-resolvable game of hide-and-seek. Hershman's strategy of multiplicity is productive and vital to the feminist politics of her work, and I argue, undermines the reading of her as the victim-turned-autonomist, and of her work as the redeemer of her life experiences. The problematic narrative arc of redemption is, perhaps, an inadvertent attempt to stabilize Hershman in her game of identity hide-and-seek, as well as to stabilize the pluralistic and indeterminate female subjectivity her work proposes. The political potential in Hershman's work, I argue, lies not in her ability to 'redeem' herself from victimization through her art, but in the constant re-framing and camouflaging of the question of her subjectivity, and female subjectivity more broadly, through the strategy of plurality. Hershman's work, I argue, destabilizes the notion of personal narrative as talking cure or symptomatic sublimation precisely because of the ever-fluctuating multiplicity of the speaking subject. Hershman's subjectivity is productively noncommittal throughout her practice, prohibiting a singular 'truth', and constantly functioning within a dialectical, or pluralistic, structure of subjectivity.

### ***Teknolust: The Dialectic of the Whore***

In the following section, I will argue that the figure of the whore, as a dialectical image – both commodity and seller, object and subject – renders her impervious to singularity and know-ability. She produces multiplicity, which is precisely why she has agency, but also why she is deemed threatening. It is her 'promiscuity' – her indeterminacy as a subject – that defines the threat and potency she represents. Hershman's work deploys these same strategies, through her representation of multiple

selves in, for example, *Roberta Breitmore* and *The Electronic Diaries*, and this is what makes her work critical. She deploys agency through the evasion of 'truth', of singularity – she performs 'identity-promiscuity'. This is also, though, what makes her work threatening, whereby the narrative of victimization-to-redemption is deployed inadvertently to close it down. The female subject as dialectical, as multiple, yields the political resistance of her work. I will begin by examining Bersani's deployment of the figure of the prostitute as resistant to redemption and then move to Rebecca Schneider's deployment of that figure as dialectical, via Walter Benjamin.

While I suggest that multiplicity is an effective strategy to resist the redemptive tendency of reading art and the artist, Bersani's proposals on how to resist the redemptive tendency follows a different path. Bersani's approach to resisting this symptomatic reading of art, in which art is a symbolic recuperation of life's failures, involves a detailed unpicking of Freud's early writings on sexuality. Through Bersani and his working through of Freud and *jouissance*, he arrives at the figure of the whore as resistant to redemptive structures of art and sexuality. While his argument is useful here, I deploy it in order to arrive at a very different definition and utilization of the figure of the whore as the non-redemptive subject performed by Hershman in her work.

Bersani suggests a distinct reading of Freud, marking a clear differentiation between symptomology and sublimation. Whereas symptom-formation, he explains, is an expression of a past connection to a desired object, sublimation, and therefore art, he argues, is an expression of a free-floating sexuality. For Bersani, that free-floating sexuality comes from early autoerotic stages of sexual development and is free of object-relations.

Bersani's argument begins with an account of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), where Freud suggests that sexuality begins by being autoerotic.<sup>78</sup> More

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<sup>78</sup> Freud, 'Three Essays on Sexuality', p. 323.

importantly for Bersani's argument, this early autoerotic sexuality 'is not directed towards other people,'<sup>79</sup> as Freud states, but, rather, it is 'independent of its object.'<sup>80</sup> As Freud later states in 'Instincts and their Vicissitudes', the 'object is negligible.'<sup>81</sup> The development of sexuality is not 'due to its object's attractions,' and so, Freud suggests, we must 'loosen the bond that exists in our thoughts between instinct and object.'<sup>82</sup>

Bersani refers to this object-free sexuality as an 'unalloyed' sexuality.<sup>83</sup> Unalloyed sexuality, for Bersani, without the anxieties of object-attachment, does *not* become a symptomatic symbolization of one's desires.<sup>84</sup> For Bersani, sublimation – cultural activities or the art object – is the determination of this unalloyed, or unfixed, sexuality. Art becomes an expression, as he writes, of a 'pure excitement'.<sup>85</sup> This 'pure excitement', for Bersani, is free of symptoms – art is no longer a sublimated symbol of a failed experience. The art object is no longer the site at which our desires are reconstituted and redeemed, but is now 'free' and ecstatic. The expression of that sexuality, particularly in art, resists redemption precisely because it is *not* a sublimated expression of a historical desire or failed experience, but an expression of an unbound sexual energy.

Significant to Bersani's argument is the relationship of this unalloyed sexuality to *jouissance*. In the writings collected in *Three Essays*, Freud argues, through the notion of 'fore-pleasure', that early sexuality is associated with a tension between pleasure and

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 321.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 292.

<sup>81</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Instincts and their Vicissitudes', in *The Essentials of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. by Anna Freud, 1991, p. 197-217.

<sup>82</sup> Freud, 'Three Essays on Sexuality', p. 292.

<sup>83</sup> Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption*, p. 37.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

unpleasure, while 'end-pleasure', an aspect of sexuality developed in puberty, is associated with the pleasure of satisfaction.<sup>86</sup> This pleasurable/unpleasurable tension of 'fore-pleasure' is what Freud describes as the tension between the sexual instinct and the death drive, whereby the subject is aiming both for self-preservation and for a return to nothingness.<sup>87</sup> The sexual instinct, Freud argues, is associated with self-protection, while the death instinct aims 'to lead organic life back into the inanimate state'.<sup>88</sup> 'Life', Freud describes, is 'a conflict and compromise between these two trends [...] the problem of the goal and purpose of life would be answered dualistically.'<sup>89</sup>

For Bersani, this pleasurable/unpleasurable tension, the tension between the drives in which self-preservation and self-annihilation crash into each other, is a 'self-shattering' painful pleasure, or *jouissance*. Bersani describes the desire for a self-shattering *jouissance* as 'a going out of oneself, indeed an uncontrollable breakdown of the very *boundaries* of selfhood, which is also an exceptional self-expansion, a kind of celebration of the self-as-world, in short a narcissistic *jouissance*'.<sup>90</sup> The central argument that Bersani arrives at, then, is the notion that art is the sublimation of our desire for self-shattering, the expression of our most unfixed sexuality, which aims for both self-negation and ultimate pleasure simultaneously. Art, for Bersani, is the expression of, or trigger for, *jouissance*.

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<sup>86</sup> Freud, 'Three Essays on Sexuality', p. 348.

<sup>87</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', in *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 18: 1920-1922* (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), pp. 7-64 (p. 62).

<sup>88</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Ego and the Id', in *The Essentials of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. by Anna Freud, 1991, p. 429-83 (p. 462).

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 462.

<sup>90</sup> Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption*, p. 74.

While it removes art's dependence on the traumas of the psyche, Bersani's theory burdens art with an entirely new weight – that of ecstasy. But more problematic is Bersani's proposition that the figure of the artist is responsible for the 'pure excitement' of her/his expressions. Bersani's proposal for resisting the problematic tendency of art-as-redeemer is a rather thorny deployment of the figure of the prostitute. Through a close reading of the Baudelairean subject, Bersani arrives at the figure of the prostitute as the subject or artist who resists this culture of redemption because, he asserts, she is filled with an unalloyed sexual energy, an energy that can be poured into its expression of choice without symptomology's hindrance of object-attachment. Bersani's use of Baudelaire's configuration of the artist-as-prostitute centers on the notion that this figure, in Baudelaire's words, is an 'inexhaustible reservoir of love.'<sup>91</sup> Bersani develops this when he writes, 'prostitution [is] purely defined as an unconditional availability to others.'<sup>92</sup> For both Bersani and Baudelaire, the artist, like the prostitute, is 'unconditionally available,' 'inexhaustible,' and insatiable. It is noteworthy that Bersani's deployment of the figure of the whore is in line with Andrea Dworkin's account of the misogynist interpretation of female sexuality, as outlined on p. 122.

Bersani continues by equating this Baudelairean whore-subject with the subject whose sexuality is, and desires, a self-shattering *jouissance*, when he writes, 'the prostituted "I" of the artist, the lover, or God corresponds to others not on the basis of similarities or of complementarity but in self-erasure, in *fusion* with others.'<sup>93</sup> The figure of the prostitute 'sacrifices' the 'I' to the 'non-I' in her self-shattering pleasure.<sup>94</sup> Bersani's definition of this self-shattering *jouissance* involves 'a going out of oneself, indeed an

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<sup>91</sup> Cited in Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption*, p. 69.

<sup>92</sup> Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption*, p. 69.

<sup>93</sup> Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption*, p. 70.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.



uncontrollable breakdown of the very boundaries of selfhood,<sup>95</sup> which aligns with his, and Baudelaire's, definition of the prostitute. The self-sacrificing subject, Bersani argues, resists the culture of redemption by being a subject whose desires cannot be symbolically or symptomatically sublimated – because this subject's sexuality is one free of object-relations. The prostitute-artist, the whorish creator, makes work that expresses itself as an ecstatic, free-flowing sublimation of unalloyed sexuality, resisting the production of an 'ultimate truth', pouring its sexual energy freely into artistic creation.

Where Bersani's proposal that art is the sublimation of a 'pure excitement', freed from the anxieties of object-attachment, gets thorny, though, is that it seems to be an expression of a rather idealistic interpretation of art – quite contrary to his original intentions. It creates another paradigm in which art becomes 'the ultimate', only now more vague, because more 'pure', and therefore more untouchable. While he unpicks Freud's early writings on sexuality in order to determine a non-redemptive version of art, he comes up with a solution that is still at least idealistic in its own right, by designating another ideal cultural goal for the function of the art object, which now reaches towards an unalloyed erotic output. Interestingly, the prostitute becomes the figure of this ideal through her supposed unconditional generosity. But like most attempts to redeem that which 'has fallen', his positioning of this figure seems to reduce her to an essentialized, (and eroticized), figure – here, as an 'unconditionally available' giver.

While Bersani's investigation of early sexuality is compelling, his employment of Baudelaire's conception of the prostitute/artist is rather problematic, primarily because of the way it reduces the idea of the prostitute – and the artist – to an essentialized figure of insatiate pleasure, generosity, and sacrifice. As Kristen Pullen asserts in *Actresses and Whores: On Stage and In Society* (2005), the prostitute has historically been associated with a 'story of sacrifice' – a sacrifice, however, commonly met with 'a consistent

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

representation of the inevitable death and destruction that awaited' her, rather than an ecstatic generosity.<sup>96</sup> Rebecca Schneider addresses the problem of essentialized insatiability, whereby the female body has become the emblem of insatiable desire in late capitalism's commodity circulation, her body the 'mascot' of inaccessibility and insatiability.<sup>97</sup> For Schneider, however, much performance work confronts this insatiability, where, she writes, 'social dramas of foundational loss and dances of insatiable desire smack against explicitly literal bodily renderings which suggest the satiate and the finite.'<sup>98</sup>

For Schneider, performance can work to undermine and problematize the correspondence of the female body with insatiable desire. Through a discussion of the work of the former sex worker Annie Sprinkle, Schneider indicates the political and critical potential of the woman associated with insatiability, through the bodily 'realness' of satiability. Furthermore, she later describes 'prostitution as both emblematic of and threatening to some of the operative tenets of commodity capitalism',<sup>99</sup> one of those tenets being, I add, the insatiable desire associated with her, and the female body more generally. For Bersani, the figure of the whore resists the culture of redemption due to her supposed insatiability; but, as Schneider's words suggest, and I maintain, the figure of the whore resists redemption – and essentialism – because the fantasy of her insatiability and the reality of her literal body politicize her subjectivity.

Schneider's assertion that the prostitute is 'emblematic of and threatening to' capitalism, stems from Walter Benjamin's claim that the whore is a dialectical image –

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<sup>96</sup> Kristen Pullen, *Actresses and Whores: On Stage and In Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 11.

<sup>97</sup> Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 5.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

she is simultaneously commodity and seller.<sup>100</sup> The prostitute, Schneider adds, embodies a 'terroristic collapse of active and passive, subject and object, into a single entity.'<sup>101</sup> The whore, as a figure, is culturally steeped in the myth of her duplicity. As Pullen effectively describes:

The whore is constructed through often contradictory terms: she is simultaneously dangerous and pathetic. The whore is relegated to the fringes of society but always threatens to infect the middle class; she is free from moral constraints but is always a criminal; she is young and attractive, but is always diseased or addicted; she has the accoutrements of wealth and luxury, but is always lower class; she freely enjoys sexual activity, but is always at the mercy of demanding customers and pimps.<sup>102</sup>

Plurality is constitutive of the figure of the whore. She is made of doubles.

The dialectical condition of this figure is also apparent in contemporary popular and critical discourse around prostitution. That she is conceived as either a victim – in which patriarchal culture has deemed her valuable only through the sexual desire she elicits as a commodity – or 'an agent of sexual expression', or businesswoman (seller), underscores the dual position she inhabits.<sup>103</sup> The debate, though, always comes back to agency – does she have it, or does she not? For Pullen, agency is fundamental to the discourse on prostitution, whereby the tension between the prostitute as 'exploited victim and sexual predator' produces a space for agency.<sup>104</sup> For Pullen, and I agree, 'the whore

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>102</sup> Pullen, *Actresses and Whores*, p. 5.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

stigma serves power, both in terms of dominant discourse and in the power of the margin'<sup>105</sup> because it can 'expose contradictions within discourse.'<sup>106</sup> Because she straddles a dialectic, the figure of the whore can act critically and politically, and, she can be deployed to do so.

One of Hershman's more recent works, *Teknolust* (2002), a feature-length film, is explicitly concerned with the concept of multiple 'selves'. Tilda Swinton plays the role of Rosetta Stone, a shy and mousy biogeneticist who has designed a method of downloading her own DNA into her computer to spawn three Self-Replicating Automatons (SRA), all played (quite comically) by Swinton with varying hair and costume colorations. The three 'sisters,' Ruby (red dress, red lips, black hair), Marinne (blue dress, ginger hair), and Olive (green dress, blonde hair) live together in their cyber-world. Ruby, though, is the only of the three to be sent out of virtuality in order to seduce men and collect their sperm – the Y-chromosome being the SRAs necessary food for survival. In order to seduce these unsuspecting male victims, Rosetta has programmed romantic scenes from classic films, which Ruby downloads while she sleeps, providing her with the necessary scripted lexicon to complete her missions. Ruby is quite literally a whore, both because promiscuous, and because she exchanges sex for livelihood – namely for food. She is the commodity and the seller, seducing men on her online portal in order to capture their sperm. And while Ruby enacts this doubling of prostitute subjectivity, the film investigates the plurality of subjectivity in other ways as well, addressing the problem of reducing subjectivity to a singular 'self', and the potential agency imbedded in multiplicity.

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 8.



Figure 16: Tilda Swinton in *Teknolust*, Lynn Hershman, 2002

The most obvious demonstration of this strategy is in Tilda Swinton's role as the four main female characters. As Swinton reflects in an interview about the process of making the film, 'I'm starting to realize that there's a general conversation I'm interested in, which is about identity and how it is possible to make friends with all our virtual selves [...] I think there's no such thing as the self'.<sup>107</sup> Here, Swinton indicates the central concern of the film, pointing to the irreducibility of subjectivity to a singularity. When asked about Ruby within the film itself, Swinton as Rosetta responds, 'this woman is me. I like to dress up like this when I'm bored [...]. It's like a role in a movie. It's more interesting than being myself all the time,'<sup>108</sup> signaling the exploration of constructions of

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<sup>107</sup> Courtney Weaver, 'Lust... For Lives – For the Male or Female, Human or Clone – Makes Actress Tilda Swinton Shed her Self, But Not her Soul,' *Black Book Magazine* (Spring 2002), pp. 68-70, Lynn Hershman-Leeson Papers, M1452, Box 64.

<sup>108</sup> *Teknolust*, dir. by Lynn Hershman Leeson (Velocity Entertainment, 2002).

femininity through multiplicity that constitute a central theme throughout Hershman's work.

The constructed-ness of identity and femininity comes through in other moments as well, particularly when Ruby 'downloads' scenes from classic films, through which she is programmed to learn particular 'feminine' behaviors or pickup lines. The most repeated lines she downloads, 'You're lookin' good, Frankie. Got a natural rhythm' (from *The Man with the Golden Arm* [1955]), and 'let's not let the celebration end. Let's not let the celebration end. Ever' (from *The Last Time I Saw Paris* [1954]) are recited to various men throughout the movie. With each repetition, the fabricated quality to her 'feminine appeal' becomes more and more apparent.

The blurry relationship between artifice and 'the real' also arises here, in relationship to gender construction. Ruby, in conversation with her love interest Sandy, reveals, 'Rosetta asked me to make sure I was more robotic on the portal because I was... I was appearing too real. It made me feel very good. Am I robotic to you?' Sandy then replies, 'no, you're very good at real. Real is your second nature.' Sandy's response indicates that Ruby is only 'real' secondarily, that she is not naturally natural but is good at playing 'real.' In the following scene, Ruby chats on her portal with what we assume to be her next food-source, to whom she seductively says, 'think of me as your second nature.' By reiterating the term, Ruby seems to be embracing the notion that 'real' is her 'second nature', and not her 'first,' suggesting here that she could be this other man's 'second', his simulacrum, his reflection. This series of dialogue further complicates the borderlines of the 'real', undermining the notion that there is a 'first' nature, an essential nature, at all.



Figure 17: Tilda Swinton in *Teknolust*, Lynn Hershman, 2002

There are a number of other scenes that point away from the notion of an essentialist 'self'. At one point, Rosetta reflects, 'every woman deserves a face of her own.'<sup>109</sup> In a later scene, Ruby walks into a gallery, and the exhibition consists solely of numerous copies of the same classical sculpture of a headless female body spread throughout the space.<sup>110</sup> In one scene, we hear the words, 'a face of her own', indicating Rosetta's desire for a singular identity, autonomy over selfhood; in the other scene, we are confronted with a faceless identity – a copy of an/other, an indistinguishable sea of (non)/selves. These two moments, particularly when looked at comparatively, underscore the question of a singular identity, rendering the desire for it, and its conceivability, an open-ended proposition. Similarly, there is another pair of scenes that points once again to the problem of a singular 'self'. Rosetta enters a salon. She tells the stylist she wants to

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look like someone else. She exits the salon – and she looks exactly the same. In another scene, during Marianne’s ‘escape’ from the cyber-world to experience the adventures of reality, she enters the same salon. She tells the stylist she wants to look like herself. She exits the salon – with a completely different look. The concept of ‘self’ and ‘other’ become blurred here, where looking like ‘one’s self’ could mean looking like anything, and looking like ‘an other’ could mean looking exactly the same. The individual is teeming with others, full of other selves, other identities. There’s a subtle brilliance to these scenes, through which Hershman acutely stages the central concern of her work, playing out and interrogating the promiscuity of identity she embodies throughout her practice.

If we recall Fox’s reading on Hershman’s later works, in which he suggests that she finds redemption through the exploration of autonomy in these works, in *Teknolust* in particular we can certainly understand his reading. For him, and for many others, autonomy is the central issue at work in this film. As Kinder writes,

*Teknolust* focuses on the relations between two equally brilliant women (here Ruby and Rosetta) who are both seeking agency in different realms and media and whose shadow relationship helps to empower not only both of them but also the rest of us.<sup>111</sup>

Additionally, as Kinder points out, the ‘intelligent agents’ in the film are female, are created by a female programmer, and have all been created by a female author – Hershman.<sup>112</sup> The film’s characters and creator exhibit their agency throughout the

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<sup>111</sup> Marsha Kinder, ‘A Cinema of Intelligent Agents’, *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson*, ed. by Tromble, 2005, pp. 168-81 (p. 180).

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.



process. Also significant for Kinder is that Ruby, as a prostitute, 'performs these moves as a free agent.'<sup>113</sup>

While analyzing *Teknolust* through the lens of agency, rather than multiplicity, is certainly valuable, Fox inevitably equates autonomy with redemption. Meredith Tromble has a similar idea, when she writes,

Hershman's oeuvre [...] acts as an effective agent of transformation for Hershman personally and also, potentially, for those who are touched by her art. Through the telling of the counterstory, multiplicity, once a wound and a defense against unbearable reality, becomes a fruitful condition.<sup>114</sup>

For Fox, Tromble's use of the counterstory is productive, for, as he writes, 'the counterstory is a necessary corrective to one's own (mis)perceptions [...]. In Hershman's case, [it is] an education in self-worth.'<sup>115</sup> As Fox and Tromble suggest, a multiplicity of selves leads Hershman towards redemption, much like Rich's use of the figure of the golem. While I also see multiplicity as productive, I also see it as a way of disengaging from victimhood. It is not a correcting of a previous self, I argue, or a redeeming of that previous self. Rather, the significance of multiplicity is in the simultaneous existence of multiple potentials of femalehood, whereby female subjectivity is pluralistic and non-essential, enacted not as a counterstory to the authentic narrative of a failed subjectivity, but as a series of stories, layered, played out simultaneously, in one body.

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

<sup>114</sup> Meredith Tromble, 'Double Talk: The Counterstory of Lynn Hershman', in *The Art and Films of Lynn Hershman Leeson*, ed. by Tromble, 2005, pp. 201-7 (p. 206).

<sup>115</sup> Fox, 'Breaking the Code', p. 8.

If we return to Bersani's engagement with memory and time, we might interpret the redemptive tendency as a way to figure Hershman's art as a recalling of an imaginary moment that is 'purer' than what might have 'actually' occurred. The desire to redeem the wounded, to erase the pains of childhood trauma, is, in its own way, a search for a phantasmatic innocence. The tendency to read Hershman's work through a lens of victimology might be a way to recover her untraumatized self, or at least salvage her traumatized self through redemption. But it also might be a way of rendering her discernible. Her identity-promiscuity – her multiplicity – renders her unknowable. The 'originally missed moment' Bersani refers to, in this case, might be the ghost not of Hershman's innocence or purity, but of her singularity (a 'ghost' being both historical and imaginary.) By designating her as a victim, the dialectical subject can be redeemed. She is relieved of blame, guilt, or responsibility, and simultaneously stripped of her agency – and, most importantly, rendered determinate. We can see her this way – she does not escape.

Hershman, I argue, resists the culture of redemption by rejecting a singular reading – a reading that would return us to the expression of an essential 'truth' and render her fixed and determinable. She resists that 'truth', bringing us towards and away from her 'self'. Her identity-promiscuity, her rejection of the singular, of one 'truth' or true self, and her infidelity to an ultimate or essential self, is what makes her work potentially resistant to narratives of victimology and redemption. Like Bersani's reading of the prostitute figure, Hershman rejects redemption – not because she gives herself over to the essentializing figure of whore-as-giver, but because she resists essentialism, and its ecstatic pull, altogether. The strategy of identity promiscuity, employed by Hershman throughout her practice, is a political move towards a female subjectivity that resists pathology, and enables her to lay claim to political agency. Hershman's work is critical

precisely because she's promiscuous and a liar – it is in her duplicity that her work stakes its claim.

## Chapter Four

### Strategic Ineptitude and Negativity: *How to Become a Cupcake/The Famous'*

#### *Adaptation of Frankenstein and Splat!*

Please watch the DVD of *How to Become a Cupcake/The Famous' Adaptation of Frankenstein* now.

*How to Become a Cupcake/The Famous' Adaptation of Frankenstein* is a revisited version of its discarded predecessor from 2010. In *Cupcake*, I attempted to turn myself into a pretty-but-useless, non-nutritious object of a woman through various physical tasks. The updated performance of *Cupcake*, however, quickly fell apart, as I repeatedly interrupted the show to talk about *Splat!* – a different show altogether. In this chapter, I argue that the failure, or 'strategic ineptitude', of maintaining a coherent show activates a significant space of multiplicity, as we watch the show, and its 'cupcake woman', repeatedly, and simultaneously, destroy itself, and return again. Just as Hershman's subjectivity shuttles ambiguously between the truth and the lie, between fact and fiction, the subjectivity I inhabit in my performances shuttles between success and failure, between the destruction and the return. Part one of this chapter works to unpick and elucidate the strategic attempt to inhabit a particular misogynist account of female subjectivity in *Cupcake*, and the strategic activation of its liminality. The political significance of strategic ineptitude is then taken up in relationship to *Splat!* in part two of this chapter, through which I posit ineptitude as a strategy that can resist the post-feminist culture of 'success' and its reliance on the culture of redemption and victimology. In this

way, the dissonant subjectivity I embody in my performances is not only resistant to the problems of post-feminist culture, but it makes it work – it makes it participate in its own unmaking. This subject, I will argue, through an analysis of my performance *Splat!*, interrogates and challenges the contemporary mainstream configuration of feminism and the post-feminism subject.

### **Part One: *Cupcake*, Representation and Ineptitude**

In October 2012, in the midst of preparing for the preview of my then-latest, and most spectacular show, *Splat!*, In Between Time Festival invited me to present my company's work at the Arnolfini Auditorium in Bristol, during the In Between Time festival in February 2013. Originally they asked for *Splat!*, which was due to premiere at the Barbican as the opening for SPILL Festival of Performance in April 2013. As *Splat!* was a commission, and contracted to the Barbican, I decided instead to use the opportunity to return to an old show that I had never really finished, and never really liked, named *How to Become a Cupcake*. Unfortunately, all I and my co-performers could think about was *Splat!*

#### ***How to Become a Cupcake/The Famous' Adaptation of Frankenstein***

On 15 February 2013, The Famous, my says-what-she-thinks pop-star persona – part-time sex object, part-time flailing mess, part-time feminist – attempts to turn herself into a cupcake – a non-nutritious, unnecessary, fetishizable piece of fluff. But given that the company and I had lost our enthusiasm for cupcakes and their conceptual filling, the only option left to us was to destroy the show in the course of its making.

As the audience enters, the show has already begun – or, perhaps, rehearsals for the show – as I, as The Famous, sing Britney Spears’ *I’m Not a Girl, Not Yet a Woman* (2001) on repeat, attempting lazily to tap dance in my silver tap shoes, neon green tutu, bikini top, purple wig, plastic silver crown, and bandage wrapped around my left ankle. The other five members of the cast, also adorned in neon tutus, perform tasks with equal insouciance – finger-fucking a jam donut, bouncing on a mini-trampoline with a melting ice cream cone, live tweeting on an iPad in the corner, indifferently filming bits and pieces on a hand-held camera feeding to a projection screen at the back of the stage, or sitting, bored, in a chair on the side of the stage, staring off into space. What follows is a collection of half-assed, seemingly unconnected scenes, all interrupted by announcements made by other cast members ‘on The Famous’ behalf’ about the show itself. Or the better show, *Splat!* – ‘not this one.’ And so the cupcaking begins.

When sick of this introductory song about womanly transformation, I sit down, as Hrafnhildur Benediktsdóttir, my principal co-performer, announces to the audience that instead of performing *Cupcake* as expected, we will be doing our own adaptation of *Frankenstein*. Then, Krista Vuori, another collaborator and company member, approaches the mike to read a section of a script of *Pinocchio* – ‘Papa, how can I become a real boy?’ – with all proper nouns replaced with ‘The Famous.’ Already, there might be four different shows happening at once. Hrafnhildur then returns to the mike to remind the audience that this show is ‘a groundbreaking masterpiece’. She then kneels down, and begins blowing up an inflatable penis attached to the microphone stand, growing her protruding appendage, like little boys who lie.

I then demand the next track and a mango, at which point I begin slowly to eat, and/or spit, chunks of mango while bouncing and flailing my body to Katy Perry’s *California Gurls* (2010). After the song finishes, I sloppily tell the audience that what I was trying to do was become the mango while I ate it. ‘That’s what I was doing.’ Krista, then,

returns to the mike, 'on The Famous' behalf', to announce, 'we've got a really great show for you. It's called *Splat!* It's not this one.'

This is followed by another half-assed scene in which I deliver a monologue about my tasty body, as sexy as a dead fish don't you wanna lick it, my tongue hanging slack like a chunk of Turkish delight, which is being fed to me line by line by Rebecca Duschl, who is also feeding me marshmallows. 'Is that it?' I ask, when we get to the mid-orgasmic end. 'What's next?' Oh right, a ten-minute scene in which I, lying upside down on my shoulders with my legs in a split, melt a Twister ice-cream popsicle into my vagina with a hairdryer. It's very hot and very cold and seemingly interminable. The image of the popsicle's red center emerging from its white and green spiral shell, like a dog's erection emerging from my vagina, is somehow both perversely pleasurable and, after ten minutes, flatly mundane.

After another announcement 'on the Famous' behalf' about how incredible this show is and another lie-inducing appendage growth, it's time for the next track – 'obviously' – to which I do an emotional contemporary jazz dance to a Backstreet Boys song, on repeat, while being sprayed with endless bottles of whipped cream. After attempts to complete the dance on the creamy, wet floor, 'I've hurt my ankle, as you can see,' I tell the audience, 'so I'm going to have to do this dance in a chair.' After one more attempt, and an emotional sing-along, I ask to move on to the next bit, 'the Frankenstein bit.'

A shoddy scene begins here, with sounds of thunder, flashing lights, and the group of performers working at a table, constructing... something. After a few minutes, a body is erected, on crutches and high heels, which, in a flash of lights and powder, comes alive – I kick the mannequin over and slip into her shoes and crutches. Magic! And now that I'm 'a real boy', it's time to sing my song, at which point I and my crutches, baby giraffe style, totter across the stage to Disney's 'When You Wish Upon a Star', and

end by standing over a pile of Fizz Whizz popping candy, leaning heavily on my crutches, pissing, creating a rather monstrous image but quite a beautiful crackling sound.

It's time to move on. 'Lucy, come here.' And Lucy McCormick comes to the microphone with her iPad from the back corner of the stage to disinterestedly read her long list of tweets about 'how awesome this show is.' 'You can tell these girls went to Laban.' '@Lindsay Lohan, you're so hot, you should be in our next show. Contact @InBetweenTime and maybe you can be in the next one'. Then, like all who come to the microphone and lie about this shitty show, she must inflate the cock.

It's time for the next Backstreet Boys song and dance, but crippled by my ankle, the six-inch heels, the crutches, and the slippery floor, I rely on Rebecca to hold my weight and move me around. Like a dancing puppet, flailing my limbs, tossing my head back and forth, we make it through this slipshod choreographic mess. At which point, the audience is reminded that they can buy tickets for *Splat!* online. Right now. On their phones.

We might as well show them some of *Splat!* I decide, 'cuz this show is shit'. I begin to describe to the audience the magic that is our new show – flying through the air, dancing beautifully on pointe shoes, giving birth to a deer, becoming that same deer – magic. The makeshift replacement 'sign of flashing lights' is brought out – a kindergarten-looking painting of the words 'The Famous!' appears on a torn scroll of paper behind my head, lazily held up by two cast members. This, I describe, doesn't compare to the real one, 'which cost us two grand.' I ask for the song from *Splat!*, Leona Lewis's *Happy* (2009), which we trade off singing while we eat McDonald's burgers, and Krista, burger in hand, shows them some of the finale dance (even though she doesn't know it.) On the repeat of the song, I move towards the audience, sit hunched over, naked and wet at the front of the stage, and sing the lyrics, looking deeply and sincerely into the audience's



eyes. After a few minutes, I grab the inflated penis, make my way upstage, smash the 'The Famous' sign with my dick, and walk off stage. The cast kind of cleans up and then gives up, leaving the stage one by one, leaving an empty and disgusting stage, while the music plays on and on, until the audience realizes we're not coming back.



Figure 18: Photograph of the vagina ice-cream scene in *How to Become a Cupcake/The Famous' Adaptation of Frankenstein*, taken onstage by performer Lucy McCormick and live-tweeted during the performance, Arnolfini Auditorium, Bristol, 2013

What was the show, and what wasn't? Did the constant presence of *Splat!* disrupt the coherence of 'the show', or was that 'the show'? Were these constant disruptions and failures constitutive of 'the show', or were they merely moments of 'reality' seeping in?

What was ‘performed,’ and what was ‘real’? Did I ever become ‘the cupcake’ the title of the show had promised?

The boundaries dividing ‘the show’ from ‘not-the-show’ are difficult to distinguish. The consistent disruptions and failures of my attempt to become ‘the cupcake’, the collapsing back into some other version of myself with each repeated failure, and the affective repercussions of that shuttling back and forth over, through, and in-between those boundaries, I argue, activates an exciting multiplicity, in relation both to theatre, and gender. This critical analysis begins with the proposal that failure, or, as I will suggest, ‘strategic ineptitude’, is an effective performance strategy that works towards critically disrupting the boundaries between ‘the show’ and ‘not-the-show’, performance and ‘reality’, or ‘the truth’ and ‘the lie,’ through which these seeming binaries might overlap.

### **Strategic Ineptitude and the Poetics of Failure**

*Cupcake* shuttles back and forth between two or more shows at a time, simultaneously performing multiple pieces within the one performance – from *Cupcake*, *Frankenstein*, *Pinnocchio* to *Splat!* And while *Pinnocchio* and *Frankenstein* seem to fade away, *Splat!* remains a consistent threat that seems to undermine *Cupcake*’s chance at ever being a ‘winning’ show. There’s a setup here of *Splat!* as successful, with its ‘magical’ moments of flying and interspecies birth, its ‘expensive’ props and beautifully choreographed dances, while *Cupcake* is posed as its sloppy, failing younger sibling. Throughout this performance, a suggestion hangs over the show of what a ‘good show’ might be. *Splat!* becomes *Cupcake*’s imaginary and impossibly-attained idea of what a show ‘should be’; *Cupcake*, therefore, is bound to exist in its margins. *Cupcake* is designed to fail.

In *Performance Theatre and The Poetics of Failure* (2011), Sara Jane Bailes identifies failure as a guiding principle for a particular genre of post-dramatic performance: 'performance theatre'.<sup>1</sup> This newly-defined category of makers, including companies such as Forced Entertainment, Goat Island and Elevator Repair Service, she argues, stage failure as a method that challenges predominant artistic, cultural, and political values around skill, virtuosity and success.<sup>2</sup> She goes on to identify 'the poetics of failure' in performance in various ways. It can voice itself as 'attending to brokenness as a structural motif', in 'gesturing towards the incorporation of the redundant and poorly conceived,' as 'boredom, slipperiness, [...] corruptibility, uncertainty, and breakdown.' She continues with more methods: 'tiredness, weariness, exhaustion, loss of purpose, and stage(d) disaster; through the repetition of the attempt [...] through stuttering stumbling [...] awkwardness and inability.'<sup>3</sup> These approaches to performance, she posits, underlie a particular subversive ethos, in which failure might undermine a mainstream capitalist ideology and its glorification of 'winning', 'achieving' and the success of one 'correct' outcome. Failure not only produces, as she says, but it also produces 'unpredictable', 'indeterminate' and potentially multiple outcomes.<sup>4</sup> *Cupcake* certainly makes use of these strategic deployments of failure, from its play with disruption, ineptitude, and its eventual breakdown into a 'bad' version of another show entirely.

Significant to Bailes' discussion is the ways in which failure might allow for a questioning of the economy of performance itself, revealing the persistent difficulty of

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Jane Bailes, *Performance Theatre and The Poetics of Failure: Forced Entertainment, Goat Island, Elevator Repair Service* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> Bailes, *Performance Theatre and The Poetics of Failure*, p. 2.

representation.<sup>5</sup> While theatre is conventionally endowed with the task of representing, reflecting, or reproducing an external reality, it is bound to fail.<sup>6</sup> The understanding of theatre as purely representation, as replication of that which is *outside* the performance ('reality') – a distinction between 'the show' and 'not-the-show' predicated on symbolized imitation of 'an original' – is also addressed by Nicholas Ridout in *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems* (2006). While theatre is traditionally expected to remain distinct from 'reality', he suggests that the moments when theatre fails to keep that distinction are precisely what we enjoy about theatre – in a nauseating kind of way.<sup>7</sup> 'Theatre's failure,' Ridout writes, 'is constitutive' – and that is exactly what we like about it.<sup>8</sup> For Ridout, the 'side affects' of theatre – the 'stage fright, animals, and other theatrical problems,' such as embarrassment, actors 'corpsing', fiasco, the precariousness of live animals or children on stage, or any other such mishap – is not only inevitable to the form itself, but it is exactly what we expect of it – it makes it what it is.<sup>9</sup> I would argue, then, that performance is *not* the representation of 'reality' – it is, significantly, the *failure* to represent reality.

*Cupcake* not only fulfills this constitutive failure of adequate representation (as all theatre does), but it also reveals its collapse. The repeated moments of disruption are moments of a conscious failure to keep distinct 'the show' and the 'reality' lying at its borders. A show is expected to be a self-contained world, but when we try to sell tickets for an entirely different event in the middle of the performance of *Cupcake*, for example,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 160. Emphasis in original.

the materiality and mundanity of 'reality' interrupts the space of representation. Even in its 'magical' moments, *Splat!* remains an extrinsic object existing outside the realm of 'the show', constituting part of the excluded 'reality' lying outside its borders. *Splat!*, in relationship to *Cupcake*, is that which lies on the other side of representation. As *Cupcake*, (the show), and *Splat!* (not-the-show/the-other-show) blur, bend, and crash into each other, 'reality' seeps in and out of the space of representation.



Figure 19: Photograph of Hrafnhildur Benediktsdóttir and Krista Vuori organizing Frankenstein's table, in *How to Become a Cupcake/The Famous' Adaptation of Frankenstein*, taken onstage by performer Lucy McCormick and live-tweeted during the performance, Arnolfini Auditorium,

Bristol, 2013

When representation fails to represent what it names, when these moments seemingly ‘outside of the show’ occur within the space of ‘the show’, the boundaries between ‘theatre’ and ‘reality’ are blurred. ‘Theatre’, here, inherently fails to represent what it names by its inability to keep itself distinct from that which it defines itself against; and, in the case of *Cupcake*, that collapse is highlighted.

This lack of distinction is further evident in the ambiguity about my bandage-wrapped ankle – the audience doesn’t know whether this is an injury or is, in fact, part of the performance. Throughout the show, my ankle is wrapped in a support bandage. The references I make to the injury later on all seem to dictate changes in the show itself – during the whipped cream dance, I say I need to do the dance in a chair; a few minutes later, I cut the dance off, asking to just ‘move on to the Frankenstein bit, cuz my ankle hurts.’ Were these ‘changes’ part of the show already? In moving on to the Frankenstein section, did we skip previously planned sections of ‘the show’ because this element of ‘reality’ has disrupted it? The Frankenstein scene, though, is an image built around the crutches – an object I inevitably need (or ‘need’) to continue the show on foot, but also an object that appears integral to the following few scenes. So was I really injured? Or was that part of ‘the show’?

This ambiguity is also part of the strategy of ineptitude, manifesting as a perceived ‘inability’ or ‘incompetence’ to keep the show on track.<sup>10</sup> Like my ankle, when *Splat!* rears its spectacular head – only to manifest as more ineptitude and mess – when we sing its song (indifferently, whilst eating burgers); do its dance (without actually knowing it, and again, whilst eating burgers); and reveal the surrogate sign of flashing lights (without any splendor, glory, or, well, lights), our ineptitude at making a complete show, from start to finish, is also revealed.

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<sup>10</sup> Bailes, *Performance Theatre and The Poetics of Failure*, p. 22.

In this chapter I use the term ‘strategic ineptitude,’ in addition to failure, in order to make a number of distinctions. Firstly, the term ‘strategic’ implies something active and deliberate, which is crucial. Calculated failure here is employed as a critical and political move, whereby, as Bailes states, ‘failure *produces*’.<sup>11</sup> And while Bailes’ deployment of failure is also as an active agent, there is another significant distinction that needs to be made. I use the word ‘failure’ throughout this thesis, particularly within this chapter, to identify a particular occurrence within representation, whereby representation itself ‘misses’, as discussed above. Inherent in representation, as I continue to discuss throughout this chapter, is a misrecognition, which is both constitutive and consequential; it is to this that I predominantly refer to as ‘failure’. Additionally, ‘ineptitude’ bears a relation to skill, ability, capability and virtuosity, whereas ‘failure’ is more commonly paired with ‘success’. ‘Failure’ hints at an overall outcome, which, in some cases in this essay is useful to discuss strategically, particularly in chapter four where I discuss failure as a strategy that resists the ‘success’ model of consumer-citizen endorsed by post-feminism. However, I am also interested in the ways in which ineptitude is used as a strategy to challenge particular modes of skill and competence built into audience expectations of performance.

Within this vein, the setup of *Cupcake* as the flailing, stumbling sidekick to the graceful hero *Splat!* works to undermine *Cupcake*’s chance at finesse. Constantly referring to this show as ‘shit’, as I do on a number of occasions, and through the Pinocchio-penis growth as the result of a performer’s lie that this show is ‘amazing’, reveals that not only are we ‘inept’ at making a show that completes itself, we don’t even care about making it good. Why on earth would we want to not only make a ‘bad show’, but also tell the audience just how bad it is? Are we really that inept?

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 3.





Figure 20: Photograph of Krista Vuori with inflatable penis, or 'Pinocchio's nose' in *How to Become a Cupcake/The Famous' Adaptation of Frankenstein*, taken onstage by performer Lucy McCormick and live-tweeted during the performance, Arnolfini Auditorium, Bristol, 2013

When the show fails itself, when we fail it, and when we throw it under the bus, a gap is revealed. 'That chasm,' as Bailes writes, occurs 'between (R)eal and represented, between "thing" and "a thing about a thing" frequently concealed but at other times



crudely exposed.’<sup>12</sup> Bailes further describes the poetics of failure as emerging ‘from an in-between place’.<sup>13</sup> In discussing *Forced Entertainment*, Bailes emphasizes the significance of ‘difference’ in their work, as a mode which exposes ‘at the same time both the thing it is and the thing it is not [...] without privileging either outcome.’<sup>14</sup> Strategic ineptitude, I add, is a strategy that reveals this gap, chasm, or site of marginality; it allows for the pretense of theater to fail itself, hence activating a cyclical journey between, or, or perhaps, a simultaneity of, ‘the truth’ and ‘the lie,’ ‘reality’ and representation. This chasm, this ‘in-between’ place, I argue, is where representation recognizes its own misgivings, missed promises, and its own economy of failure. Performance cannot be distinguished from ‘reality’ and yet it is conventionally defined only by its ability to do so; therefore, I argue, it is always both, jumping back and forth between the two, never really settling. As Bailes writes, ‘representation poses a double-failure’,<sup>15</sup> and yet, I add, it keeps trying to succeed, to signify. While all performance lies in this in-between space, *Cupcake* exposes this journey through deploying ‘strategic ineptitude’. In *Cupcake*’s repeated attempt to return to itself, and in its repeated failures to maintain its coherence, it reveals its own multiplicity and dissonance – as ‘the thing it is’ and ‘the thing it is not’.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 11. Here, she refers more distinctly to the idea of this ‘double-failure’ in a slightly different way. One is the failure of representation to represent what it names, as I’ve identified. Interestingly, for Bailes, representation’s other failure is the failure of ‘the present that instigates the initial impulse towards artistic activity’, just as Bersani outlines as his primary point of cultural concern in *The Culture of Redemption*. Later in this chapter, I discuss how that tendency problematically engages with the politics of representation and its critical ability.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

My speaking of *Splat!* during *Cupcake* is a disruption of the performance through which *Cupcake* cyclically succeeds and fails to fulfill its supposed purpose. These are moments in which *Splat!* – that which is outside ‘the show’ – threatens the coherent borders of ‘the show’. At the end of the performance, the show collapses into a cheap replication of *Splat!*, but, I argue, it also simultaneously rejects it, highlighting it as a moment that doesn’t belong. *Splat!* is caught in a cycle of succeeding and failing, as it bounces in and out of the representational space of *Cupcake*.

As Ridout suggests, the show will always fail to fulfill its own name– not only because the signifier constantly fails itself, but because that which is meant to be ‘outside’ the show repeatedly approaches and withdraws from its edges. In this repetitive cycle of approach and withdrawal, the borders that divide ‘reality’ – or, here, *Splat!* – from the realm of representation – here, *Cupcake* – are erased and highlighted in the same moment, and ‘the show’ implodes, and yet simultaneously flourishes, as does the function of representation altogether, in which these two ‘worlds’ are meant to remain distinct, but cannot.

### **‘Woman’, Multiplicity and Failure**

Butler often refers to the failure of the signifier ‘woman’ to represent women. As she writes, ‘the constitutive instability of the term [“woman”], its incapacity ever fully to describe what it names, is produced precisely by what is excluded in order for the determination to take place.’<sup>17</sup> ‘Woman’, as she explains, cannot represent every possibility of womanhood, and therefore always has a fictitious relationship with its

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<sup>17</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 165.

referent.<sup>18</sup> There is an unattainability constitutive of identity formation precisely because that which is a 'woman' cannot be clearly defined and distinguished from that which it is not, from that which it defines itself against. If 'woman' can only pretend to be what it names, 'woman' becomes the act on stage, attempting to imitate the false 'reality' of its designated subjects; and yet, like theater, it fails to represent, fails to imitate, because that which it claims to represent is unstable as well.

Each time *Cupcake* is interrupted, the coherency of 'the cupcake woman' is also disrupted. Just as 'the show' promises to fulfill itself as 'a show', the title of the show also makes a promise – that I will, in turn, 'become a cupcake.' But as the show fails and falters, as *Splat!* derails *Cupcake's* 'intended' narrative, so does this other promise. The constitutive failure and impossibility of 'woman' to represent what it names is explored in my purposeful failure, or strategic ineptitude, to allow 'the cupcake woman' to ever be fulfilled.

The 'eat-be' dance, as I call it, when I attempt to 'become the mango while I eat it', is an example of my attempt to become 'the cupcake woman' and my inevitable failure to do so. I should, as I've described, turn into a sweet, juicy, exotic fruit through my dancing. But, rather than become a pleasurable thing to consume, my spasmodic movements, slips and spits, undermine my attempt. Equally, the other two dances in the show, also proclaimed attempts to become the cupcake, are self-sabotaged and become slipshod messes. The tireless spray of whipped cream covering the stage completely impedes my ability to complete the emotionally expressive choreography; and my exhaustion towards the end of the show renders me incapable (or 'incapable') of performing the last dance alone, requiring Rebecca to hold me up and swing me around like a flaccid puppet. The results of these three dances are not beautiful, visually

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

pleasurable expressions of my cupcake-ness, but rather, moments of designed ineptitude in order to expose the inherent impossibility, or failure, of the 'cupcake' subjectivity itself.

Like the dances, the monologue I perform also begins as if to accomplish the task at hand – to become a cupcake. But it quickly sabotages itself by doing what it claims 'too well':

Look at me I look so fucking sexy mmm yeah I know you just want to lick me so tasty and sweet and ripe like a juicy little berry take a bite come on baby mmm take a lick and a bite my salty skin like a fresh little salmon belly look really hard at my tits until you can stare through my skin like superman and see my mammary glands probably doing nothing aren't they hot look at them winding through that sexy fatty tissue like dead earthworms fuck yeah I know you want it I know you want to bite into those fatty earthworm-filled sweet potatoes bite them hard until my milk and my blood gushes into your face and you can drink my sweet pink juice now look at my ass cheeks two bouncy sweet melons creamy and white look at how much you want to lick them I can see it in your eyes look deeper now and see that brown wormhole between the cheeks that sexy poop-stained canal don't you just want to stick your tongue up there and take a chocolate lick mmm yeah that's sweet and good keep looking up and you'll see my sexy curvy intestines filled with chocolate chunky cream open up your throat and take a gulp fuck yeah I'll push it out for you bite into that chocolate chunk of sweetness lick it off my rim eat that chocolate goodness mmm yeah now take a look at my crotch my soft bare babyskin vulva pink like the sweetest cotton candy my vaginal hole red and juicy and dripping with sweetness come have a good lick stick your massive tongue up my vagina break through my cervix and lick the bloody walls of my uterus sweet like juicy skinned summer plums I'll clench and release clench and release to

pump more bloody sweetness into your salivating mouth and eyes suck on my bloody hole like a stubborn sucking candy suck all that sweetness out while you stare at my sexy fucking crotch fuck yeah oh yeah that's so hot and you looking at me like that staring at me staring through me like that oh yeah it just fucking turns me on so I lay there like a dead fish to get you closer to cumming ooh yeah I just lay there like a corpse it's so fucking hot I know how you like it my jaw hanging slack no sounds coming out just drips of saliva my tongue limp like a chunk of turkish delight oh suck it yeah suck it hard my arms dangling like sexy sausage rolls at the butcher oh yeah just how you like it my whole body collapsed like a fucking corpse oh yeah come on baby come all over this dead fish I see how it turns you on come on baby yeah fuck yeah.



Figure 21: Still from video documentation, marshmallow-monologue in *How to Become a Cupcake/The Famous' Adaptation of Frankenstein*, Arnolfini Auditorium, Bristol, 2013

Not only does the monologue fall into a too-literal version of itself, overdoing it, thereby undermining any chance at being erotic, but my performance of it is also rather inept. Rather than memorize it, I require a cast member to feed me the lines by whispering them to me. I can't hear her most of the time, so I am forced to interrupt my 'sexy talk' with brash interjections in order for her to repeat the lines. Additionally, I am being fed marshmallows while reading. Rather than a sexy scene of licking fingers and lips, my mouth quickly becomes overfull, with marshmallows spilling and spewing from my face. I then begin to lick the ones I can't fit in my mouth and stick them to my nipples under my bathing suit top, which I later remove to reveal a very un-sexy tumor-like breast situation. My constant disruptions of this 'sexy' scene undermine its potential at ever fulfilling its stated purpose.

Strategic ineptitude', though, is not just *failure* – it is a determined rejection, a purposeful refusal to fulfill a subjectivity that does not fit. As Judith Halberstam describes in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), 'we can [...] recognize failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique.'<sup>19</sup> The strategic failure to become the 'cupcake woman' is not only an attempt to reveal the inherent failure and impossibility of this misogynist female subjectivity, but it is a refusal to fulfill her. The politicized embodiment of the repetitive cycle of shuttling, in this case, between the woman I 'should' become, and the woman who 'fails' to fulfill it, is an embodiment of multiplicity, of dissonance, through which this subjectivity can be politicized and critiqued.

The vagina-ice cream scene, for example, is a moment in which the image fluctuates back and forth between the subjectivity I 'aim' for– here, the woman of unnecessary fetishizable fluff– and the woman on stage, actively attempting, and

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<sup>19</sup> Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 88.

constantly failing, to achieve that goal. The image both fulfills that goal – in its literal rendering of turning myself into something sweet, in its potential fetishizing of my ‘tasty body’ – and also fails it. The image, in its repetition, in its duration, de-fetishizes itself – the appeal and curiosity lapses into indifference and boredom. The camera, here, close up on my vagina, is both complicit in my fetishization and simultaneously acts to undo that possibility via the projected image’s intractable endurance and arguably horrific frankness. Additionally, my running commentary – ‘ouch this is hot’, ‘uuugghh’, ‘this sucks’ – constantly interrupts the process of my cupcake-becoming, placing me at once inside and outside the world of ‘cupcake woman’. Like *Splat!* constantly moving between the representational space of *Cupcake* and being rejected from it, this scene moves me repeatedly between the successful fetishizable subjectivity and the woman it excludes. By inhabiting her and rejecting her, simultaneously, I inhabit a multiplicity, a dissonance, which undermines the ‘cupcake’ subjectivity’s chance at fulfillment, critiquing her in the process. That which is ‘meant to be’ fetishizable and sexy becomes boring, annoying, and un-erotic.

This cyclical oscillation between the ‘cupcake woman’ and the woman attempting to fulfill her is a constantly fluctuating cycle. Just like ‘theater’ and ‘reality’, the boundaries between these two worlds are in a constant state of flux. My repetitive attempts and failures to fulfill this particular subjectivity, again, produce that never-ending cycle. My actions are a wavering of success and failure, an oscillation between representation and the unreachable. I am neither here nor there, and I am in both places at the same time, highlighting the repetitive circle of construction and collapse of the divisions between the fixity and fluidity of her subjectivity.

Additionally, the constant ambiguity of my identity, as I flit between Lauren, The Famous, and ‘the cupcake woman,’ produces a further multiplicity of my subjectivity. When is it me? When is it someone else? Who is complaining about the ‘boring section’

of the show, and who is reveling in the overcharged lyrics of The Backstreet Boys? Who is injured, Lauren in 'real life' or The Famous on stage? The ambiguity of these various subjectivities is significant to deploying this strategy of multiplicity, through which the fixity of my perceived subjectivity is rendered unstable, thereby calling into question the stability and coherence of 'the cupcake woman'.



Figure 22: Still from video documentation of vagina ice-cream scene in *How to Become a Cupcake/The Famous' Adaptation of Frankenstein*, Arnolfini Auditorium, Bristol, 2013

### **The Attempt, Repetition, Pleasure and Death**

My strategic ineptitude at embodying 'the cupcake woman' during the performance activates the potent overlap between representation and 'reality,' particularly as it relates to women's bodies and women's experience. By shuttling back and forth between fulfilling her and failing her, or reaching for her and rejecting her, a space of multiplicity is revealed. This journey, however, is further laid bare by the repeated structure of the 'attempt.' As Bailes writes, 'The relentless to and fro-ing between the construction and



demise of the image in these performances rewrites the “attempt” structure as a motif that anchors the event whilst maintaining it in a state of calculated indeterminacy.<sup>20</sup> This indeterminacy is produced by the never-ending quality of ‘the attempt’. The object of desire is never purposefully achieved or acquired, and so the reaching continues ad infinitum. In *Cupcake*, ‘the attempt’ carries through every scene. When the mango-dance fails, I try the sexy monologue; when the sexy monologue fails, I try the popsicle-melt; and so on. The ‘attempt’, here, is characterized by the fluctuating cycle of the reach and the fall, as each attempt spurs the necessity of another attempt. The attempt is characterized by the desire and subsequent death inherent in its repetition. Repetition itself is a process of success and failure. Inherent in repetition is a process of reaching towards the void in order to render something desired attainable, and of an inevitable failure and imperative to repeat. Repetition is the ‘attempt’ and its outcome, cyclically.



Figure 23: Still from video documentation of whipped-cream dance in *How to Become a Cupcake/The Famous’ Adaptation of Frankenstein*, Arnolfini Auditorium, Bristol, 2013

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<sup>20</sup> Bailes, *Performance Theatre and The Poetics of Failure*, p. 69.

Freud's theories on repetition open up a useful interrogation into the effects (and affects) produced by repetition. In 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle,' Freud attempts, as he describes, 'to solve the problem of the relation of the instinctual processes of repetition to the dominance of the pleasure principle.'<sup>21</sup> Throughout his writing Freud begins to doubt the predominance of the pleasure principle, made most apparent in this particular essay, where he begins to question whether the death drive might actually override it. In order to analyse the drive of repetition, he describes his famous case study of the '*fort da*', the game of the child who repeatedly threw his toys away from him and uttered what was interpreted as the German '*fort*', or 'gone'. Upon the return of the toy, he would celebrate with the German '*da*', or 'there'. The game, Freud suggests, was about the disappearance and return within this repeated act, which might be a coping mechanism for the child's mother's regular departure and return. For Freud, the fact that the first action – '*fort*' – was repeated considerably more than the return, indicated that 'the pleasurable ending' was perhaps not the driving force.<sup>22</sup> He goes on to suggest that it is perhaps the active role in becoming 'master of the situation' which drives the compulsion to repeat, independent of its pleasure or unpleasure.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', in *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 18: 1920-1922* (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), pp. 7-64 (p. 62).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

Freud goes on to make two further claims significant to this discussion. One is his doubt, and eventual reversal, of his original proposal that the pleasure principle is predominant, which I will return to momentarily. The other is his claim that the compulsion to repeat can also be understood as an attempt at recuperating 'a forgotten past', to return in time.<sup>24</sup> Butler grasps to the concept of the temporal rift repetition might solder, whereby, she claims, 'repetition instates *the pleasure of temporal continuity* between the irrecoverable past and the unknowable future.'<sup>25</sup> For Butler, repetition acts as reparation, as a way of re-producing 'a history of dissatisfaction.'<sup>26</sup>

Interestingly, this proposition problematically reinstates my account of what Bersani takes issue with in chapter two: that this particular notion of re-production as recuperative imposes a narrative of redemption, in which the repetitive act is a way of making up for the failures of 'reality', or lived experience. If we return to the problematized proposition towards the beginning of this chapter, that performance is the imitation, representation, or *repetition* of its original referent, 'reality', we are returned to a formula in which the art object might lose its criticality or ability to politicize, whereby, rather than propose an alterity, it would merely repeat, reify, and re-stabilize the conditions of 'reality'.

In my proposition that performance is *not* the representation of reality, but precisely, and excitingly, the failure to represent it, performance becomes capable of posing critical questions. The cyclical relationship whereby performance exists in the

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<sup>24</sup> Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', p. 19.

<sup>25</sup> Judith Butler, 'The Pleasures in Repetition', in *Pleasure Beyond the Pleasure Principle: The Role of Affect in Motivation, Development and Adaptation*, ed. by Robert Glick and Stanley Bone (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 259-65 (p. 273).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 275.

space between ‘the thing it is and the thing it is not’,<sup>27</sup> as I’ve argued, is precisely why it is ideally positioned to unfix and subvert other problematic significations. If performance succeeded to repeat reality, it would fall to one side of representation. If performance succeeded, it would only succeed in repeating another symbolic space, not just of the theatre, but of the fixity and confinement of the social conventions, laws, and constructions that define ‘the real world’. The notion that repetition, or representation, is inherently a failure provides it with its political edge. Not because it fails to make up for ‘real life’, but because it reveals the failure of ‘real life’ itself. Because of representation’s inherent failure, the fixity of the symbolic space of ‘real life’ cannot be represented in the in-between and dissonant space of performance as fixed – it cannot help but be problematic.

Returning to Freud’s writings on repetition’s relationship to the drives, while he originally claimed the predominance of the pleasure principle, as the essay continues, he reverses his claim, purporting instead that the pleasure principle might operate ‘in the service of’ the death drive, or as he explains, ‘to return to the quiescence of the inorganic world,’ or, ‘a momentary extinction.’<sup>28</sup> As Butler describes in ‘The Pleasures of Repetition’,

Repetition compulsion reveals a primary urge to return to a state in which the problem of pleasure and its satisfaction cannot even be posed; neither the temporary respite from excitation, nor the fantasized reconstruction of the past as a legacy of pleasure, repetition designates the thorough obliteration of the

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<sup>27</sup> Bailes, *Performance Theatre and The Poetics of Failure*, p. 78.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

problematic of pleasure itself. In other words, repetition compulsion signifies the desire not merely for death, but for the possibility of *never having been born*.<sup>29</sup>

And while this analysis seems to sum up Freud's most lasting proposition that the pleasure in repetition is overwhelmed by the stronger drive towards extinction (the death drive), in his wavering between the power of one over the other, an exciting space of dissonance is exposed. Butler explains, 'between pleasure and satisfaction, a prohibition or negation of pleasure is enacted which necessitates the endless repetition and proliferation of thwarted pleasures'.<sup>30</sup> I build on Butler's analysis here, by suggesting that inherent in repetition is a lack, a space of negation, an unattainable exteriority that constitutes repetition's imperative and its pleasure. While there is pleasure in repetition, that particular pleasure is dependent upon repetition's inherent death. One repeats in order to achieve something that has failed before. The lack to which Butler refers exists within the space of failure – the moment after the death of the attempt and before the rebirth of an opportunity. This lack is both that which is desired and the failure to obtain it; it is the hope for success and negation of its possibility. It is both desired and denied. Desire, itself, dependent upon the unattainability of its object, is a kind of death. This lack, then, is a death, and therefore, a drive to continue repeating.

In *Cupcake*, the repeated moments of interrupting the show just to talk about the show itself; the constant reminders, and the eventual pseudo-performance, of a different show entirely; the songs that stop and start again; the monologue that pauses after every line to be fed the next one, with the words 'what did you say?' cutting it in pieces – these are moments of little deaths. 'The show', as we expect it, has momentarily failed itself. But then the show returns – only to die again. If, as previously stated, repetition repeats

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<sup>29</sup> Butler, 'The Pleasures in Repetition', p. 264.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 272.

itself because of its wavering success and failure, then the repeated 'attempt' that constitutes the structure of the show points to the cyclical oscillation not only between theatre and external reality, but also between pleasure and death.

These moments of 'attempt', in their repeated triumph and fall, evoke both disappointment and pleasure. To cut a song off in the middle, as I do with every pop song in the show, before I've 'succeeded' in singing it completely and thereby fulfilling the role of the suffering, fetishized, incomplete and otherwise compromised woman described by its lyrics, renders an affective disappointment. That I inevitably fail to finish the show at all, and that I fail to finish it as 'the cupcake' I've promised I'd become, produces an unsatisfactory conclusion to what the night has promised. Those attempts, and those failures, inevitably eclipse the possibility of 'the show' ever fulfilling itself. And yet it keeps trying.

Equally, there is a pleasure in this ever-returning dissatisfaction. The pleasure in watching a signifier fail to fulfill itself is at once devastating and utterly reassuring– to watch me succeed in becoming the 'cupcake woman' would be far more devastating than seeing my endless fluctuation between my womanhood and the inevitably unattainable subjectivity – for it would demonstrate the success of 'the cupcake woman', and therefore the failure of everything that falls around her. There is relief in that fluctuation, relief in the multiplicity enacted through reaching that subjectivity and rejecting it. There is pleasure in performing, and, I speculate, in watching, that endless journey back and forth between success and failure. In *Cupcake*, strategic ineptitude activates the feminist potential of multiplicity, of dissonance and liminality, of fulfilling and rejecting a designated subjectivity. My inept performance of the 'cupcake woman' reveals the political space in which a woman can fulfill her name and reject it, simultaneously.



Figure 24: Photograph of the final scene before the cast abandons the show, in *How to Become a Cupcake/The Famous' Adaptation of Frankenstein*, taken onstage by performer Lucy McCormick and live-tweeted during the performance, Arnolfini Auditorium, Bristol, 2013

## Part Two: *Splat!*, Redemption, and Ineptitude

### Post-Feminism and The Culture of Redemption

As discussed in relation to *Cupcake*, strategic ineptitude opens up a space for multiplicity, through which the alternative success and failure to inhabit a particular post-feminist subjectivity is enacted in my performances. While part one of this chapter worked through the strategy of enacting this liminal subjectivity, the following will situate that subject within the cultural and political framework of post-feminism. I will continue by briefly re-addressing post-feminism, building on my argument that in its configuration of the 'successful' subject, popular feminism relies on victimology, as well as a narrative of redemption for the female subject, as discussed in chapter three. Here, I analyze my performance *Splat!* as a work that resists post-feminist subjectivity, revealing its dissatisfaction, and producing agency deriving from the liminal space of negativity and failure.

As discussed throughout this thesis, post-feminism's appropriation of feminist vocabulary not only has socio-cultural implications, but it also directly impacts upon contemporary subjectivity. The pop-feminist deployment of this vocabulary positions a female subjectivity that must be complete, coherent and successful. This vocabulary of productivity sustains, or aims to sustain, the coherence of the subject, her 'completeness', and her impermeability. This 'coherent' model of subjectivity, though, rejects the admittance of mess, failure, humiliation, disgust, or even resistance.

As discussed in chapter three and the introduction, the cultural tendency to cast women as victims is clearly upheld in post-feminism's reliance on narratives of trauma



and victimization. The all-too-common article towards the end of each *Marie Claire*, *Cosmopolitan* and other called 'women's magazines', of the newly empowered survivor of rape, domestic abuse or non-Western socio-political oppression, is a narrative that portrays a woman who must experience victimhood and hardship, in order to rebuild, to be 'capable' and to achieve this 'successful' mode of womanhood.<sup>1</sup>

Lauren Berlant explains that the sense of emotional commonality that defines the kind of 'market-structured juxtapolitical sphere' of 'women's culture' often derives from a kind of generic sense of mistreatment or survival of 'social negativity', such as with an oppressed or victimized group of people. The market-based sphere of 'women's culture', she explains, is one built around 'optimism and social self-cultivation'.<sup>2</sup> The intimate public spheres Berlant describes are ones, much like I discuss in chapter three, that rely on a kind of redemption, or survival – perhaps a thriving-after-adversity – in relationship to an assumed or 'sensed' generic hardship or victimization. She explains that woman from different backgrounds, classes, races, and experiences are drawn to the sentimental deployment of 'suffering' and 'survival' and the 'generic or conventional plot' of the subject who transforms 'from weakness to strength, aloneness to sociability, abandonment to recognition'.<sup>3</sup> The narrative of redemption is explicitly present in the lexicon of women's culture and post-feminism.

These stories also do the work of conflating quite serious political conflict and cultural-ideological differences with personal stories of abuse, as well reducing the kind of liberation from any of these circumstances to the same kind of 'liberation' as learning how to dress for success or experimenting with your kinky side, not only by situating

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<sup>1</sup> See footnote 91 in introduction for examples.

<sup>2</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

these articles side by side, but by utilizing the same kind of vocabulary of 'empowerment' in both, as discussed earlier.

Tabloid-based media similarly relies on these narratives, often celebrating the failure of female celebrities to 'keep it together' and their inevitable demise into victimhood. Britney Spears is perhaps the best example of this phenomenon – her shaved head is a contemporary the symbol of pop-sex-icon casualties. In 2007, Spears notoriously shaved her head, got tattoos, and spent time in a rehabilitation centre, for which she was often referred to as 'crazy', or 'descending into madness'.<sup>4</sup> Simultaneously, this was seen as a 'call for help', because Spears was 'broken'.<sup>5</sup> In her fall from grace, she is portrayed as both guilty and victimized. She is guilty for displaying her sexuality so flagrantly (as well as actually achieving the model of the pop-feminist 'successful woman'). At the same time, she is a victim, particularly to the music industry who had 'pimped' and 'exploited' her and then abandoned her, to borrow a phrase from Sinéad O'Connor in her open letter to similar pop-figure Miley Cyrus.<sup>6</sup> In both cases – the *Cosmo* survival article, and Britney's fall – pop-cultural media steeps the female subject in the myth of essential victimhood, celebrating the model of the woman who is empowered because she survives a trauma or succeeds in fulfilling her fundamental role

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<sup>4</sup> Andy Soltis, 'Britney Spears Shaved her Hair Off in 2007 to Cover up Drug Use: Ex-Aide', *New York Post*, 20 October 2012 <<http://nypost.com/2012/10/20/britney-spears-shaved-her-hair-off-in-2007-to-cover-up-drug-use-ex-aide/>> [accessed 12 September 2015].

<sup>5</sup> Sheila Marikar, 'Bald and Broken: Britney's Shaved Head', *ABC News*, 19 February 2007 <<http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/Health/story?id=2885048>> [accessed 12 September 2015].

<sup>6</sup> Sinéad O'Connor, 'Sinéad O'Connor's Open Letter to Miley Cyrus', *Guardian*, 3 October 2013 <<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/oct/03/sinead-o-connor-open-letter-miley-cyrus>> [accessed 5 October 2013].

as victim. The female subject's 'empowerment' seemingly celebrated by pop-feminism only exists in relation to her inevitable failure.

Corinne Squire also asserts that the pervasive repetition of the empowered victim narrative is detrimental falls in line with my claims. While such narratives might offer a sense of optimism or hope, she argues, the ubiquity of the figure of the victimized woman begins to look like sociological fact, rather than the result of individual or personal experiences.<sup>7</sup> Just as McRobbie claims that many cultural and institutional activities act as a faux-feminist guise for patriarchal re-instantiation, the use of the empowered victim narrative is a guise for empowerment that reinstates the role of women as victims. The ubiquity of this narrative indicates the reliance on 'the culture of redemption', in which, as I explain in chapter three, the empowered subject, the subject who has access to some form of agency, inevitably requires 'redemption' – as a way of stripping her of her own agency. This culture of redemption relies on the phantasmatic, historical purity of the subject, and the risk that she will become a whore, whereby her 'fundamental' state as victim must be reinstated, or, at least, recalled and remembered. While post-feminism appears to celebrate individual empowerment, it also works to disavow the empowered subject, returning her back to her 'pure', 'real', 'fundamental' state as victim. The post-feminist mode of empowerment is often a doubling, and a disguise, whereby 'empowerment' is constrained by a patriarchal essentialist perspective of the female subject, and the subject's agency is still regarded as a threat requiring mitigation.

As I argued in chapter two, dominant culture vilifies the figure of the whore, or the displayed female body, and often seeks its redemption in the figure of the victim. But at the same time, that same body is what drives desire – the female body is 'the insatiable

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<sup>7</sup> Corinne Squire, 'Empowering Women? The *Oprah Winfrey Show*', in *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader*, ed. by Charlotte Brunsdon, Julie D'Acci, and Lynn Spigel (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 98-113 (p.102).

mascot' of commodity culture, in the words of Rebecca Schneider.<sup>8</sup> This body, this 'whore' figure, is both desired and denied. While post-feminism often celebrates the 'sexually liberated' woman, encouraging the notion of self-pleasure as Gill discusses, and evident in Levy's configuration of the 'Female Chauvinist Pig' and McRobbie's 'Phallic Girl', it seems that the woman who actually enacts such behavior is often punished for it. Promiscuity, dressing in a highly sexualized manner, and the agency of pleasure are celebrated by these figures as modes of contemporary 'empowerment.' Her sexual freedom is encouraged, but once enacted she is often vilified— highly visible in the cultural temptation of 'slut-shaming'. Because post-feminism's adoption of agency is just a façade, when some form of agency is actually achieved, the woman is often punished. Like the figure that requires redemption in chapter three, the post-feminist 'whore' or 'slut' is also guilty. In post-feminism, the whore is both celebrated and hated. The post-feminist configuration of the whore figure is a double-edged sword, whereby women's physical display or promiscuity is either a triumph of free will and choice that avoids any discourse around the potentially misogynist consequences of their display – or it renders her a victim.

Britney Spears' configuration as both guilty – for appearing like a 'whore' in her highly sexualized performances – and as a victim – again a 'whore', but passively (a 'slave'), to her industry – epitomizes this double pitfall. Her song titles are indicative of this configuration as well: *Hit Me Baby One More Time* (1999), *Born to Make You Happy* (1999), *I'm a Slave 4 U* (2001). But Britney, after her fall, made a comeback – with songs that clearly indicate the 'Female Chauvinist Pig' post-feminist subjectivity discussed throughout this chapter: *Womaniser* (2008), *If You Seek Amy* (2008) (with its 'secret' double meaning: F-U-C-K Me), *Work B••Ch* (2013). And, like all victimized women, we celebrate her 'recovery' and re-entry into the sexually and financially empowered model

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<sup>8</sup> Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London: Routledge. 1997), p. 5.

of the successful subject. She has been redeemed. She's a survivor. Just like Beyoncé says in her Destiny's Child hit, *I'm a Survivor* (2007). Just like Rihanna proves over and over again by returning to her notoriously abusive relationship with singer Chris Brown.<sup>9</sup> She's now permitted 'empowerment' because she has fallen. But is Britney's shaved head an image of victimization? Of failing to keep it together? This iconic image is not, perhaps, a depiction of her fall (nor of her eventual resurrection), but of her refusal. This, I posit, is the image of Britney resisting her 'completeness', her success as a 'coherent' female subject. However messy, incoherent and inadvertent that refusal appears, Britney's 'madness', I argue, can be understood as a form of resistance against the model of the 'complete' female subject that has measured her supposed 'successes' and 'failures'. Britney's inadvertent resistance to the strict expectations around her subjecthood, however, also reveals the failure of the pop-sex-icon itself – for, if Britney can't uphold it, who can?

### ***Splat!*, 'Blue-balling', and Negativity**

Britney's inadvertent instance of hairless resistance is a useful point of comparison for the subjectivity I present in my performances. Like Britney in her head-shaving moment, the subject in my performances also resists the post-feminist model of affirmative female subjecthood, although, here, this resistance is deliberate. *Splat!* puts to the test the post-feminist reliance on a structure of subjectivity defined by its 'empowered' completeness, in which mess or failure undo that subject's coherence and steep her in victimhood, before she may be redeemed for any kind of access to empowerment she might have

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<sup>9</sup> James Robertson, 'A Complete Timeline of Rihanna and Chris Brown's Relationship', *Mirror*, 4 October 2012 <<http://www.mirror.co.uk/3am/us-gossip/rihanna-and-chris-brown-back-together-1360148>> [accessed 20 September 2015].

achieved. The culture of redemption is undermined by *Splat!*'s dissatisfaction, its negativity, its ineptitude, and its incompleteness. I will examine how these strategies act to puncture models of female subjectivity presented in pop-feminist narratives of trauma and survival, in which the female subject's access to 'empowerment' is contingent on her victimhood – in which the female subject is affirmed only through, after and because of previous trauma, thereby disavowing her access to agency whilst appearing to confirm it. *Splat!*, in its attempt to fulfill this post-feminist figure, 'fails' – or, shuttles back and forth between 'success' and failure', like the 'cupcake woman' – resisting the fate of the pop-feminist subject, who is always wishfully redeemed of her traumas. The subject presented by *Splat!*, therefore, accesses an agency determined not from her 'completeness' but from her resistance to completion – or her incompleteness. Like *Cupcake's* 'cupcake woman', the space between reaching this post-feminist figure and rejecting it, reveals a kind of agency arising from negativity, from multiplicity, and from dissonance.

*Splat!* resists the culture of post-feminist affirmation and empowerment by engaging with it, forcing it to participate in its own unmaking. The use of the exclamation point in its title already signals a strange unmaking of affirmation, through the joining together of an excitable punctuation mark and a word that connotes mess and death. The two elements, combined in an abrupt (and also perhaps silly) conclusiveness, render a title that enacts and expresses an enthusiastic death. Equally, for example, the scene in which I insert the handle of a knife into my vagina and pop tomato-filled balloons to the beat of a 90s dance hit, pairs together the affirmative and empowering tone of post-feminism and the mess and death that unmake it. The upbeat music, my enjoyment of the action, my dancing along to the rhythmic pulse in my rather slutty bathing suit all indicate the post-feminist mood of empowered sexuality. This mood, however, is ruptured by the violence and mess of the scene. The risk of the knife, the abruptness of its insertion, the bursting of bloody sacs spurting all over the stage, all force that affirmative, sexualized subjectivity

into question. My mess forces that post-feminist subjectivity to participate in its own rupture, its own fragmentation, and its own unmaking.



Figure 25: Tomato-split in *Splat!*, The Barbican, 2013, image by Jon Cartwright



Figure 26: The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein in knife scene, *Splat!*, The Barbican, 2013, image by  
Jon Cartwright



Kim Solga writes about my body of work, suggesting that it poses the question: 'does this freedom of "the hot and famous" represent any kind of real power for girls and women?' She expands on this thought, reiterating my concern of the post-feminist demand for female subjects of 'capacity' and 'success' when she continues:

Or is this [freedom] another example of neoliberal exceptionalism, in which select women are represented as the embodiment of 'having it all' – evidence of feminism as having 'won' – while the rest of us struggle to make sense of why we don't feel better about the shapes of our bodies or more secure about the options available for our futures?<sup>10</sup>

Anticipating my overview of the post-feminist configuration of 'success', Solga indicates here that this model of subjectivity prohibits any kind of failure, or incompatibility, relegating those that refuse, or fall outside of this model, into some kind of loserville for inadequate subjects.

She indicates the way in which this post-feminist model of 'success' is complicated in my work through my engagement with this post-feminist subject, as well as my messy and exhausting aesthetic. She explains,

[*Splat!* and *Cupcake*] stage post-feminism's vaunted 'girl power' as gloriously messy, physically draining, and ultimately deeply dissatisfying. Holstein celebrates, glorifies, punishes and desecrates her explicitly sexualized body on stage in a series

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<sup>10</sup> Kim Solga, *Theatre and Feminism*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), p. 60.

of self-contradictory performance actions that work to expose the contradictions buried within 'girl power' itself.<sup>11</sup>

My work utilizes the images, vocabulary, and constraints of 'girl power', enacting, and then dismantling 'what post-feminism demands of young women'.<sup>12</sup> She continues to describe the way in which the work mimics and perverts 'what (neoliberal) women want' by enacting these contradictory actions in my 'characteristic sexy-gross mash-up', in which the work "'does" contemporary populist feminism as a confusing mess', such as in the knife insertion scene described above.<sup>13</sup>

The loud, chaotic, flying-hump scene in which I thrash around in a flying harness to three repetitions of Nicole Scherzinger's *Poison* whilst sucking on and spitting out chunks of watermelon, is another scene that enacts this model of post-feminist sexualized empowerment, but also undermines it. The pop song, my humping, thrusting, and twerking, the sexualized licking of melon, all play into the figure of the self-objectifying, empowered post-feminist subject. However, the mess of the melon, the overzealousness of my dancing, my physical exhaustion, and the exhaustion and frustration of repetition, all act to expose the contradictions inherent in this post-feminist subject, as well as the contradictory set of emotions that accompany her. Her elusive sexiness is undone, and so is her 'success' model of empowerment, because I fail it – I am exhausted by it. Here, I both succeed and fail to fulfill this model of 'empowered' post-feminist subjectivity, crashing its assumed success into its inevitable disappointment and dissatisfaction. As my physical exhaustion becomes audible through my screams over the music and my heavy breathing during its lapses, and in my determined yet capitulating tone when I pant, 'play

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

it again,' this subject's ability to retain her 'successful' and sexy mode of power is fragmented. Here, this subject is both complicit and disappointed. I urge repetition, I force it out of my body, dancing and humping until I have no breath left, in search of a satisfaction that never fully materializes. As Solga writes in a reflection on *Cupcake*,

I hear in her voice the exhaustion, disillusionment, even the sense of loss that are the by-product of creating the sexy-dirty images of girl-power fame-and-fortune around which the show is built. [...] [T]he hard physical and emotional labour that goes into becoming the 'cupcake' – the empowered woman who no longer needs the help of feminism – shines into view.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 61.



Figure 27: The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein twerking and flying in *Splat!*, The Barbican, 2013,  
image by Jon Cartwright

This exhaustion, this dissatisfaction, is strategic. I deliberately construct scenes, actions, and narratives through which that disappointment – that unfilled satisfaction – is brought to light. Like in the *Poison* scene, each narrative is brought to an unsatisfying rupture. Each narrative that begins, each appropriation of identity, ends abruptly, and though the excess, spectacle and showtime-y extravagance escalate throughout the show,

it all amounts to very little. Everything is cut short before it can resolve – this incompleteness is what I call ‘the blue-ball effect’ – cutting off the pleasure source before the satisfaction of ‘completion’. ‘Blue-balling’ is a slang term that refers to the uncomfortable feeling for a man when he is aroused and brought to the edge of orgasm, without the final satisfaction that ejaculation might provide.

Bambi, for example, first appears in *Splat!* when I give birth to a 1988 McDonald’s Happy Meal toy in his image. After violently birthing my inner (completely innocent and un-savage) beast, I disappear behind the eight-foot target at the back of the stage. I return abruptly at the end of the third repetition of Nicole Scherzinger’s *Poison* by bursting through the target on roller-skates, wearing a white bikini (in the style of a 1980s hair-band groupie) and a massive stuffed-toy Bambi head. After catching my breath, I begin to sing (amidst panting) Aladdin’s *A Whole New World* a cappella, while the two rather defective princesses, Hrafnhildur Benediktsdóttir and Krista Vuori, assist my Bambi-like inability to skate across the stage. The last dramatic note (‘For you and meeeeeeee... peeeeeeee...’) ends with urine cascading down my legs, as I pose like a male dog (or deer – although I have since learnt that apparently deer don’t do that) marking my territory on the microphone. As described in the interlude of this thesis, I continue to mark my territory on various set elements and cast members. When my bladder empties, I begin marking my territory with artificial menstruation blood – chunky ketchup in a test tube inserted into my vagina – the last of which is caught in the mouth of my (sexier, more talented) mini-me, played by Lucy McCormick. I then straddle Lucy while she soaks up my bloody mess, and we (very un-seductively) make-out. At this point I decide it’s time to move on to the next scene, which is complicated and involves a set change, so Lucy is ordered to go in front of the curtain and sing to keep the audience entertained.



Figure 28: Lucy McCormick and The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein making-out in *Splat!*, The Barbican, 2013, image by Jon Cartwright

In this scene, the innocent, virginal, infantilized creature, undoes herself. I perform her Disney-fied sweetness only to then urinate all over it. Though I put on her outfitted identity, I just as brashly take it off. The quality of this appropriation, and others within the show, is somehow simultaneously violent and insouciant, perhaps both due, in part, to their fleeting temporality – before I even pull the new identity over my ass and zip it up, I’m already ripping it off, busting out of it or sullyng it beyond recognition. Though the Bambi narrative returns with me hanging by my ankles 15 feet above the stage dripping ketchup-blood, I begin eating a burger and reading the budget of the show before any satisfaction of a resolved narrative can be felt. Equally, ‘The Tale of Little Bitch’, which I read earlier in the show from an excessively large storybook, again, ends abruptly, with ‘The End’ positioned in the middle of the story, the slamming shut of the book and my moving on to the next performed narrative. At the end of each narrative, I neither die as the victim nor succeed via the acquisition of ‘empowerment’. In the end,

the audience isn't left with the satisfaction of the victim story, nor the affirmative survival story. That I need to be dragged off the stage in my refusal to end the show is an echo of my refusal to fulfill these 'complete' narratives of womanhood, revealing its inevitable dissatisfaction.



Figure 29: The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein eating a burger in *Splat!*, The Barbican, 2013, image by Jon Cartwright





Figure 30: The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein reading the budget, *Splat!*, The Barbican, 2013,  
image by Jon Cartwright

The two moments in the show when the female subject portrayed is perhaps 'complete' are my ballet pointe dance and Lucy's song – both (arguably) moments of virtuosity and 'success'. These moments, however, are purposely positioned 'outside' the narrative of the show. Else Tunemyr, playing a disaffected witch-twin, introduces the pointe piece when she says to the audience, 'we are now going to take a brief pause while we get ready for Act Two'. The lights go to black, and the dance begins – a dance that is intended to celebrate the ability of the body, its un-mess. (Although even this is punctured by my apparent exhaustion.) When the dance ends, the lights come back up. I vehemently throw a watermelon onto the stage, which cracks into pieces, and shout 'Act Two!' announcing to the audience that 'the show' has returned. These moments of 'success', of virtuosity and coherence, are positioned as 'not part of the show' – they are not part of the narrative of female subjectivity that we are actively developing in 'the



show', and so we communicate their rupture of 'the show' to the audience. These scenes are also determinedly settled in an ambiguous space, as we have chosen to include them in the show (but not 'the show'). These two moments, however, are, like the show's trauma-narratives, unfinished. I break the composure of the pointe piece with the watermelon splat, and I interrupt Lucy's beautiful singing by yelling at her to 'shut up' from behind the curtain when the next scene is ready. It is a strategic move towards unsatisfaction.



Figure 31: Backup dancers and The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein in *Splat!*, The Barbican, 2013,  
image by Jon Cartwright

But there is something harrowing about the fact that in *Splat!*, I desperately attempt to perform these traumatic identities while simultaneously striving to entertain and dazzle the audience with the showtime-y spectacle of flashing lights, flying trapeze, and chorus of 25 dancers. Additionally, the scene in which I ask to be brought back 'my

broken things’ – the Frankenstein watermelons and wig – is equally disillusioning. These ‘broken things’ can be read in reference to the archetypical dis-identifications of womanhood I try on throughout the show, and my dissatisfaction with them is encapsulated by my request. Bring them back, I suppose, because there aren’t any other representations of contemporary female subjectivity to be had. That line evokes, for me, a crushing sense of rupture. And yet, again, they are made frivolous, forgotten about and abandoned, disappearing into the mess of the stage like the tomatoes into the cauldron, as I continue singing.

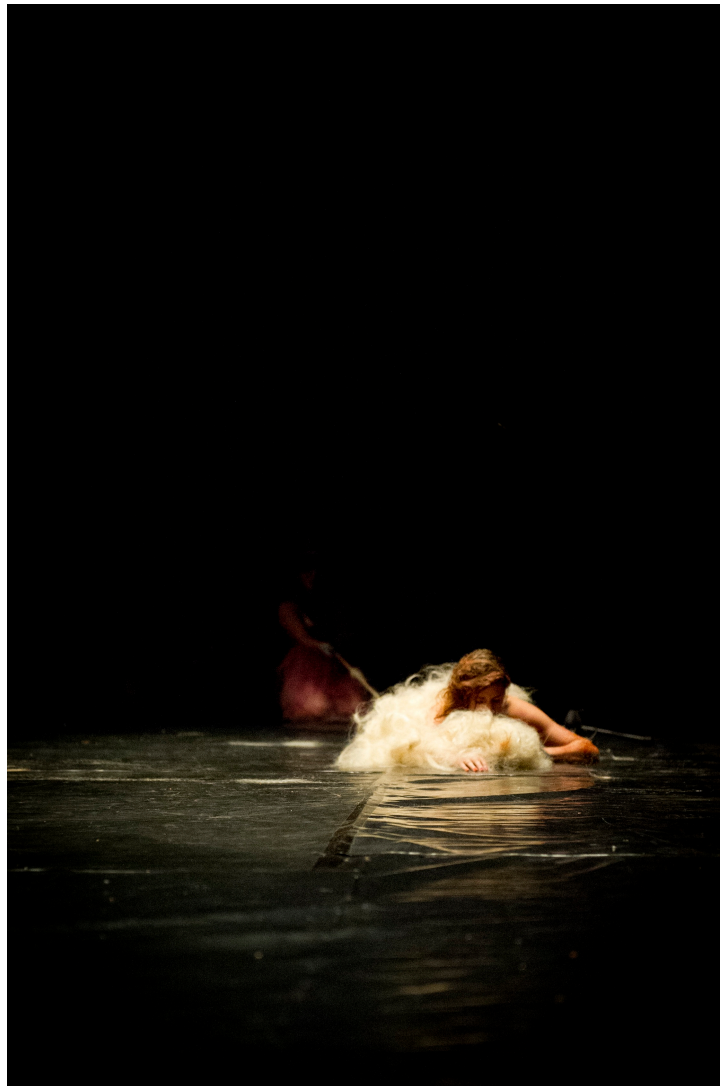


Figure 32: The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein being dragged off the stage in *Splat!*, The Barbican, 2013, image by Jon Cartwright

This complex interplay between dissatisfaction, disappointment, and failure, though, brings us back to the discussion on the efficacy of strategies of failure and ineptitude in chapter three. The strategic failure – or refusal – to enjoy the full-fledged post-feminist narrative of the empowered victim, through ‘blue-balling’ it, through exposing its disappointment and impeding its satisfactory completion, is a similar strategy to the repetitive disruptions in *Cupcake*, which refuse a neat relationship between theatre and external reality. Failure, strategic ineptitude, and ‘blue-balling’ are of similar ilk, working as a form of resistance to the popular narratives of womanhood present in my work.

For Sara Jane Bailes, failure, as a strategy and as a discourse, is politically resistant to dominant cultural and historical narratives, which celebrate notions of ‘progress’ and ‘victory.’ Failure, she writes, ‘undermines the perceived stability of mainstream capitalist ideology’s preferred aspiration to achieve, succeed, or win.’<sup>15</sup> Similarly, she writes, ‘by refusing to deliver an art product that is easy to interpret or accommodating as an experience’, like *Splat!*’s refusal to provide a satisfying conclusion to – or relief from – any of the narratives it opens up, the work echoes the effects of the kind of performance Bailes analyses, which ‘achieves a conscious alignment to failure’ that resists mainstream capitalism’s – and, I would argue, post-feminism’s – reliance on the narrative, or subject, of ‘success’ and ‘capacity.’<sup>16</sup> Strategic ineptitude, I argue, can be articulated as the purposeful failure to maintain the coherency of the post-feminist subject and a refusal to participate in the commodity-obsessed capitalist culture that is so strongly aligned with post-feminism’s reinstatement of conventional gender hierarchies. The empowered victim figure I inhabit in *Splat!* is thrown aside repeatedly, relegated to a messy site of

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<sup>15</sup> Bailes, *Performance Theatre and The Poetics of Failure*, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

incompletion, as a refusal to fully participate in her world. 'Blue-balling', failure, and ineptitude are strategies that act to resist the modes of empowerment promoted by dominant culture, instead arriving at alternative modes of being, living, performing, and accessing agency.

A particularly political and rewarding aspect of 'blue-balling' – as an idiosyncratic type of performed failure – is the space it leaves for multiple possibilities. Bailes continues to explain that while success-based values of mainstream culture are 'exclusive' and 'prohibitive', failure involves an 'unpredictable outcome', opening up the opportunity for other potentials, rather than closing it down to a singular outcome or a certitude. She writes,

A prescriptive definition of success appeals to conservative ideology and the normative ambitions that consolidate its ideals, whilst the altogether messier undisciplined tactics that failure permits contribute to an anti-conformist ideology, one that seeks to redefine and loosen the boundaries that determine lived experience and representations that chase after it.<sup>17</sup>

As Bailes suggests, failure leads to the 'loosening of boundaries', the opening up to alternative potentials. Equally, 'blue-balling' in *Splat!* opens up a space for alterity and multiplicity. *Splat!* begins a narrative, a subjectivity, and leaves it unfinished. And in that space before the narrative might end is a space of possibility, of potential, of multiplicity. The show could go on like this forever – I could become an ideal victim, but I also could become its opposite, the empowered survivor. That multiplicity is both enacted in the show itself and is implied in its unfinished-ness. By refusing to satisfy the seemingly inevitable resolutions to these narratives, I am positioning myself as ambiguously both

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

and neither the victim and/or the affirmed woman of post-feminism. This refusal places these roles in a liminal state; they are not whole, true, or essential, as they are not completed. These roles are fragmented by their irresolution. By 'blue-balling' these narratives, the female subjectivity at hand is punctured, fragmented, and rendered multiple.

The enactment of multiplicity is, in itself, a political move. Multiplicity acts strategically as a mode of resistance to the essentializing tendency of post-feminism. The post-feminist subject configuration relies heavily on the simplification, or singularization, of the subject. As Berlant describes, women's culture survives because its 'central fantasy' is 'the constantly emplotted desire of a complex person to rework the details of her history to become a vague and simpler version of herself.'<sup>18</sup> By disrupting and 'incompleting' the pop-feminist narratives of trauma and survival, the female subject I embody can be both traumatic and empowered, or neither; she can be both sincere and indifferent to the liminality of her position as both of these things. She is multiple, she is dissonant, and she is fragmented across possibilities, resisting the singular fate of commodified subjectivity.

As Solga points out, my work is a 'response to the losses that structure our so-called "post-feminist" present' and, she states, is in the process of 'navigating the demands that present makes on [the artist's] body and [the artist's] politics.'<sup>19</sup> Like the subjectivity I inhabit in the work, contemporary feminism itself struggles with its place in a world bombarded by commodified subjectivities defined by popular media. Solga also suggests that my work takes place 'between a historical feminism that sought to empower [my generation], and a contemporary, "post-feminist" popular culture in which empowerment is available only to female bodies made sexually attractive in depressingly

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<sup>18</sup> Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Solga, *Theatre and Feminism*, p. 61.

conventional ways.<sup>20</sup> My attempt to reclaim feminist agency is in my use – perhaps my exploitation – of post-feminist culture itself, forcing it to question its own problematic construction of subjectivity. *Splat!* searches for, and alights upon, a feminist agency that derives from the liminal body, from the messy body, from humiliation, awkwardness, difficulty, ambiguity – from the sites between the fulfillment and the failure of the post-feminist subject. This agency is one of resistance, of negativity, and of messiness, that confronts dominant notions of ‘success’, ‘empowerment’ and affirmation. She refuses redemption, embraces her promiscuity, her multiplicity, and her fragmentation – these are her most valuable tools. She may be a whore, and she may be a mess, but those qualities are precisely the source of her agency.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

## Conclusion

### Contemporary Strategies of Negativity

Throughout this thesis, I have sought to establish the effects of my own performance work, as well as to set up a historical context out of which my claims emerge.

Post-feminism is discussed in length in the introduction as a cultural context that works in collusion with popular culture and commodity capitalism to market and sell a kind of faux feminism. I have argued that the backlash against feminism appears not only as a rejection of feminism altogether, but also as a re-appropriation of its vocabulary by mainstream culture (pop-commodity culture), through which a fierce individualistic ideology takes hold in the form of 'empowerment'. 'Empowerment' and 'choice' are marketed as feminist agency, regardless of whether the consequences of those choices are misogynist or feminist. Through a relationship with what Sara Ahmed refers to as a culture of happiness, post-feminism outlines the ideal female subject as one that is 'successful', 'capable', and 'empowered'. But this configuration of the empowered subject is also closely tied, as Lauren Berlant writes, to a shared feeling of survival or an overcoming of trauma, a kind of empowered based in victimization. This system of victimology is discussed throughout the following chapters in more depth, particularly in chapters two, three and four.

After a textual description of *Splat!*, I contextualized my practice within a lineage of feminist performance from the 1960s to the present, analyzing the works of Carolee Schneemann, Hannah Wilke, Ann Liv Young, GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN, and Nao Bustamante. This chapter set up the works of Schneemann and Wilke as predecessors to my own practice, through which they asked similar questions, but in a distinct historical context, to my own work. Schneemann and Wilke's work poses questions around the authority of the displayed female body, challenging assumptions around that body's

inherent position as a victim to misogyny. These questions, I have argued, are still relevant today. By calling into question the subjectivities demanded by post-feminism, the works of Young, GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN, and Bustamante, alongside my own, bring contemporary provocations to the question of the displayed female body. In my discussions on their work, I have shown the ways in which these contemporary artists are working within a similar context, and with similar strategies, to my own work. Through deploying strategies of negativity, such as ineptitude, 'blue-balling', mess, and aggression, these artists are also engaging with the problematic world of post-feminism and its reliance on the culture of affirmation.

In the second chapter, I indicated the ways in which the displayed female body is often associated with victimization. Using Marina Abramović's direction of the 2011 gala at Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and its surrounding critique, alongside the Toxic Titties' infiltration of Vanessa Beecroft's *VB46* at the Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles, in 2002, I aimed to show how the displayed female body becomes entangled in allegations of the problematics of exploitation. The thorny relationship between 'art' and 'the institution' particular to these two performances allowed for an unpicking of 'the rhetoric of prostitution', as Jennifer Doyle has termed it, which was invoked by Yvonne Rainer to critique Abramović's direction of the MOCA event.<sup>1</sup> But as Doyle points out, through invoking this rhetoric, any kind of exchange can be rendered 'dirty'. While the exploitative working conditions of the performers involved are certainly of significant cultural relevance, the displayed female body became entangled as a site of victimization in this 'dirty' exchange.

The entanglement between the displayed female body and its victimization that circulates within dominant culture, I have argued, stems from the appropriation and

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Doyle, *Sex Objects: Art and The Dialectics of Desire* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 51.



recirculation of anti-porn feminism's most problematic tenets. Andrea Dworkin's work, specifically, while I believe does offer crucial evidence of the way misogyny circulates throughout mainstream culture, problematically lends itself to particularly unhelpful readings. Her refusal to account for female pleasure, or agency, and her conflation of sex, violence, nudity, and misogyny, have taken hold in dominant culture in two ways. Firstly, it has been redistributed to stand in for all feminisms (and particularly all second-wave feminisms), through which the backlash, or rejection, of feminism by young women has taken hold. Secondly, I have argued, it both reflects and impacts upon conservative culture's assumptions that the displayed female body is inherently that of a victim.

In the third chapter, I took up this tendency towards victimology by outlining it through Bersani's culture of redemption, and the work of artist Lynn Hershman. Here I have argued that the tendency to redeem the figure of the whore as a victim is culturally pervasive, and stems from a desire to recuperate a kind of 'pure', singular, or essential version of female subjectivity. Hershman's work, which is often pathologized as symptomatic of her traumatic experiences, and through which she is often posited as a victim who finds liberation or redemption in her art, I argue, actually resists these readings. The power of Hershman's work is in her deployment of multiple subjectivities, through which any kind of singularization or essentialization is rejected. Hershman's play with a promiscuous identity and her play between the truth and the lie, allows her work to inhabit a space of in-between-ness, through which its critical agency is activated.

This potent in-between space is precisely where I situate my own practice. Like Hershman, my work plays between the truth and the lie, between representation and 'reality', in order to unhinge the post-feminist world it inhabits. I have argued that *How to Become a Cupcake/The Famous' Adaptation of Frankenstein* plays distinctly with the assumed certainty of representation, revealing its inherent failure, and then reveling in its collapse. *Cupcake*, a show designed never to fulfill its promise as a show, also reveals,

and revels in, the failure of its central subject, the 'cupcake woman'. It is in this chapter that my engagement with strategies of negativity emerges, as it is through my deployment of 'strategic ineptitude' that this performance destabilizes the potential of successfully 'becoming the cupcake'. Strategic ineptitude, I argue, opens up a space for multiplicity, whereby I can both inhabit and reject this problematically misogynist configuration of female subjectivity, thereby politicizing it. Furthermore, by likening the structure of the 'attempt' that shapes this performance to repetition, I work through repetition's affective manifestations as excitingly dissonant, through Freud's writings on the pleasure principle and the death drive. In the show's structure of the 'attempt', in its repetition of success and failure, both pleasure and death (or disappointment) are revealed. It is in this cycle between success and failure, pleasure and disappointment, that the female subjectivity I inhabit (and reject) in the performance is further politicized and rendered liminal. In part two of this chapter, I examined the political and cultural context of this liminal subjectivity. The reliance on trauma, and on female victimization, as discussed in relation to Hershman as well, is all too apparent in popular culture's takedown, and rebuild, of celebrity figures like Britney Spears, as well as in women's magazines' seemingly mandatory monthly article about a woman's victimization and subsequent empowered survival. The culture of redemption, which relies so heavily on victimization and recuperation, functions deeply within post-feminist structures of subjectivity. *Splat!*, I have argued, resists these delineations of subjectivity, through strategically incompleting, or 'blue-balling' the narratives that produce her. By inhabiting a post-feminist subjectivity, and making a mess of her, by refusing to drown her victimology, redeem her flaws, or celebrate her survival, the subjectivity in *Splat!* is resistant. She is unfulfilled and unfulfilling, exhausted and exhausting, dissatisfied and dissatisfying. She is both that post-feminist subject and the woman who refuses her, forcing post-feminism to participate in its own subversion, in its own negation.

## A Final Note on Resistance

*Cupcake* and *Splat!* work strategically with negativity in order to critique, resist, and re-write contemporary modes of female subjectivity. That artists like Ann Liv Young, GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN and Nao Bustamante, in ways equivalent to myself, make use of the post-feminist lexicon in order to problematize it, speaks towards a contemporary strategy of resistance. To repeat Judith Butler's words, 'this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power,'<sup>2</sup> is precisely where I situate the agency of these post-feminist rebels' performances. The ways in which mass media and popular culture have so drastically involved themselves in our daily visual culture, I believe, necessitates this particular mode of resistance, through which the sources of problematic representations of women can be turned against itself. It is an appropriation of an appropriation, through which I, and these other contemporary makers, can imbue a misused image with new meaning, with critical meaning. Through negativity, performance can actively resist and re-write problematic constructions of female subjectivity, producing modes of agency that are not pre-packaged commodities, that are not reliant on capitalist modes of success, but that are fiercely powerful in their mess, in their fragmentation, in their failure. The Famous might look like a post-feminist mess, but in the careful construction of her failure, lies a determined and resistant agency.

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<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 184.

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